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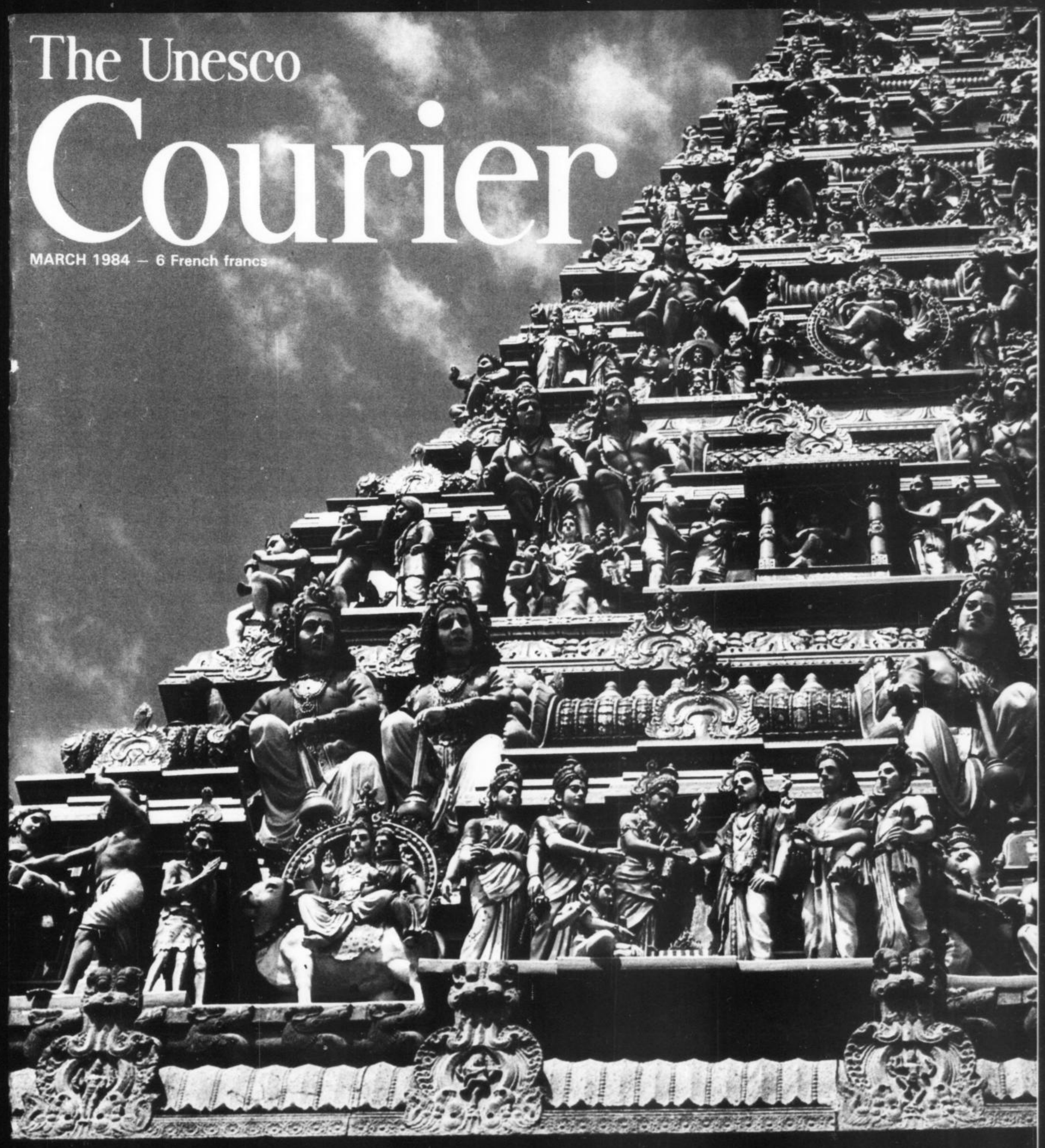


THE LIVING CULTURE OF THE TAMILS

Pause for peace

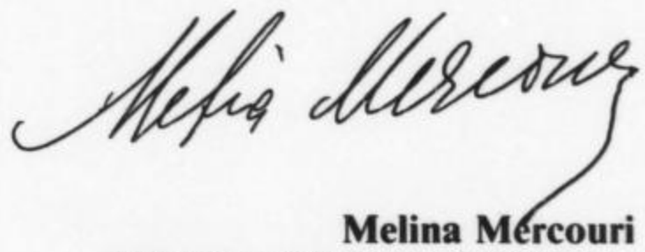
IT must be considered both absurd and intolerable that people in all countries should live in dread of global war, a war which, whether by design or accident, would inevitably involve a nuclear confrontation.

It is not only that future possibility but its present manifestations that we contemplate with horror. The increasingly dangerous rhetoric and threats that are bandied about, the violence that already rages in many countries, the insane arguments that are heard in favour of increasing still further stockpiles of weapons that are already capable of destroying the world ten times over—these things are even now distorting our daily lives and playing havoc with the world economy and with the hopes of humanity.

How can we and how can our children, make plans for a peaceful, productive life when we read that a poll of citizens in a certain town showed they would commit mass suicide rather than face such a war? How can we live normal, useful lives when the world's leading scientists tell us we are only a few minutes away from doomsday? What kind of consolation is it to be told—without a word of pity for the survivors—that fifty per cent of the world's population might survive the nuclear holocaust?

Motivated by the growing conviction that the peoples of the world must themselves assume responsibility for peace, as the representative of Greece, I proposed to the General Conference of Unesco in Paris last October that, at the stroke of noon on the first day of spring, 22 March, everywhere in the world, North, South, East and West, all activity should cease for one minute: for that one minute all traffic should come to a standstill, workers in factories should lay down their tools, teachers and pupils in their classrooms and judges in their courtrooms should stand, sessions should be suspended in the parliaments of the world, and in barrack-rooms and on training-grounds soldiers should join in a worldwide affirmation that the resolute demand of all is for peace.

I was extremely heartened by the adoption of this proposal in the form of a General Conference Resolution. I now appeal to Unesco and its Member States, using all the means at their disposal, to undertake at once a world campaign to publicize this resolution and to enlist universal participation. I know that the time for doing so is short, but time is short in a much deeper sense.



Melina Mercouri
Minister of Culture and Sciences
The Hellenic Republic

The General Conference...

Appeals to Member States to set aside on 22 March 1984, on the stroke of noon, one minute during which all men, women and children, irrespective of their occupations, will stop their activities in order to demonstrate, unanimously, their desire for peace, international understanding and universal co-operation.

(Resolution adopted at the twenty-ninth plenary meeting, on 23 November 1983).

The Unesco Courier

A window open on the world

MARCH 1984 **37th YEAR**

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Editorial

THIS issue of the Unesco Courier *presents through a mosaic of texts and pictures some aspects of the life and culture of the Tamil people, the overwhelming majority of whom live in the State of Tamil Nadu in the extreme southeast of the Indian peninsula.*

This culture is remarkable on many counts, not least because Tamil is the oldest of India's modern languages—it has been cited as "perhaps the only example of an ancient classical tongue which has survived for more than 2,500 years with its basic structure intact". In addition to Tamil Nadu, where it is the State language, Tamil is also spoken by an estimated four million people who live in Sri Lanka, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, parts of East and South Africa, Guyana, and islands in the Indian Ocean, the South Pacific and the Caribbean.

The present issue, which consists largely of contributions from Tamil writers and scholars, looks at the present as well as the past of a developing society searching for a fruitful relationship between ancient traditions and modern life, between city and countryside, between indigenous forms of creativity and outside influences.

In a scene-setting article current trends in the social and cultural life of Tamil Nadu are charted by S. Ramakrishnan. Other aspects of the contemporary situation are evoked in articles on modern movements in Tamil literature and on the changing status of women, and in a text in which poet and novelist Sundara Ramaswamy captures something of the flavour of everyday life.

Turning to the past glories of Tamil culture, François Gros examines the highly sophisticated techniques of sangam *poetry, the very early Tamil writings supposedly produced in three* sangams, *or academies, in the city of Madurai. Other distinctive historical contributions of the Tamils to world culture are the great Hindu temples with their towering* gopuram *(pyramidal gateways) and decorative sculptures, and the remarkable bronze images of Hindu divinities. In addition to an analysis of these achievements, we have discovered for our readers a little-known text in which the great French sculptor Auguste Rodin thinks aloud as he contemplates with an artist's eye a masterpiece of Tamil art, a bronze statue of* Siva Nataraja, *the Lord of the Dance.*

Finally three areas in which past and present are one: the cult of local gods and heroes whose colourful statues adorn the villages of Tamil Nadu; Tamil gastronomic traditions; and the classical dance known as Bharata Natyam *which was for centuries performed in the great temples and which today, brought to the stage, is captivating audiences in Tamil Nadu and in many other countries too.*

With this issue the Unesco Courier *remains faithful to its vocation to promote intercultural contact and to make the achievements of the world's great cultures more widely known.*

***COVER* : Detail of the Sri Kapaliswarar temple, Madras**
Photo © Jean-Baptiste Faivre, Paris

Photo © Raghavendra Rao, Madras

THE words "Tamil culture" immediately evoke the image of the towering *gopuram* (entrance gateways) of the Hindu temple, at once a commanding grandeur and solemnity; of a beautiful dancing girl, decked out in all her finery, graceful and lovely; to the literary minded, of the squatting sage Tiruvalluvar with his palm-leaf and stylus; to the gastronomically inclined, of *idli* (a rice and lentil batter) and *sambar* (lentils, vegetable and tamarind).

When we attempt to understand what constitutes Tamil culture in terms of an average man's life, particularly in the context of the present day, we encounter elements which cannot be isolated and defined, yet are deep rooted in a society which has always been instinctively aware of its strengths and weaknesses.

Over the centuries Tamils have spread outside their territory and in this process have planted signs of their presence many of which can be found even today. The Tamil community thus represents a population outside Tamil Nadu also. In their own land Tamils have been subject to significant foreign influences and, today, the admixture of these influences is so complex that it is difficult to talk about "typical" or "native" Tamil culture. Today's fashions, food habits, life-styles, values are all products of this long history of interaction.

For the first time in the known history of two thousand years the land of the Tamils has definite boundaries and this has brought about a greater cohesion among Tamils. Particularly since Independence and the creation of States based on linguistic regions, Tamils have had a land with which to identify their language and culture. With the introduction of Tamil as a medium of education at all levels, an attempt has been made to update the language after it lay submerged and subjugated for nearly three hundred years under the impact of the English language.

The recent establishment of a university at Thanjavur—Tamil University—crystallizes the aspirations of their society. The objective of this university is to strengthen the various applications of the language in a modern context and to enquire systematically into its past so that a relationship can be established between tradition and modern life.

The emotional togetherness that has come about has been aided by the planned economic activities in the State. The most striking result of the economic programmes is the high degree of mobility seen among the people. Tamil Nadu is among the very few States in India in which almost every village is connected by road or rail. This

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S. RAMAKRISHNAN *is a qualified economist and social scientist who began his career in marketing. A few years ago he founded a publishing company to promote the dissemination of new, high quality Tamil literature. He is closely associated with the* Kafadataba *literary movement.*

The living culture of the Tamils

by S. Ramakrishnan

mobility has affected the personal, economic and social life of average Tamils. The facility of communication has began to narrow down regional differences in life styles.

A mobile population is an informed population. Tamil Nadu is one of the States in the country with a high rate of literacy. It must be remembered that one of the first three universities to be established during the colonial era (1857) was at Madras, the present capital of Tamil Nadu. Educational facilities are growing so rapidly that between 1979 and 1981 the number of boys at higher secondary schools increased by 45.1 per cent and that of girls by 66.5 per cent. Education is no longer confined to traditional general education. It has diversified and new branches of training are constantly evolving. While the number of universities offering general education has risen, separate universities for technical subjects have also been established. Tamil Nadu now has one Agricultural University, one engineering and technological University, as well as a National Institute of Technology. Significantly too, women are entering professional colleges in increasing numbers.

In Tamil Nadu, the reading habit is widespread. Every week 1.73 million copies of eight popular magazines are sold and read by approximately 8.5 million people. In one segment of the reading public—the urban Tamils—42 per cent of those above fifteen years of age read a daily newspaper and 46 per cent read a weekly publication. The second most widely read weekly in India is a Tamil weekly.

These magazines shape public opinion on all vital issues, but their main motive is entertainment. They cater for popular tastes; the three most common themes are cinema, religion and politics—almost in that order of importance. Cinema gossip and news dominate.

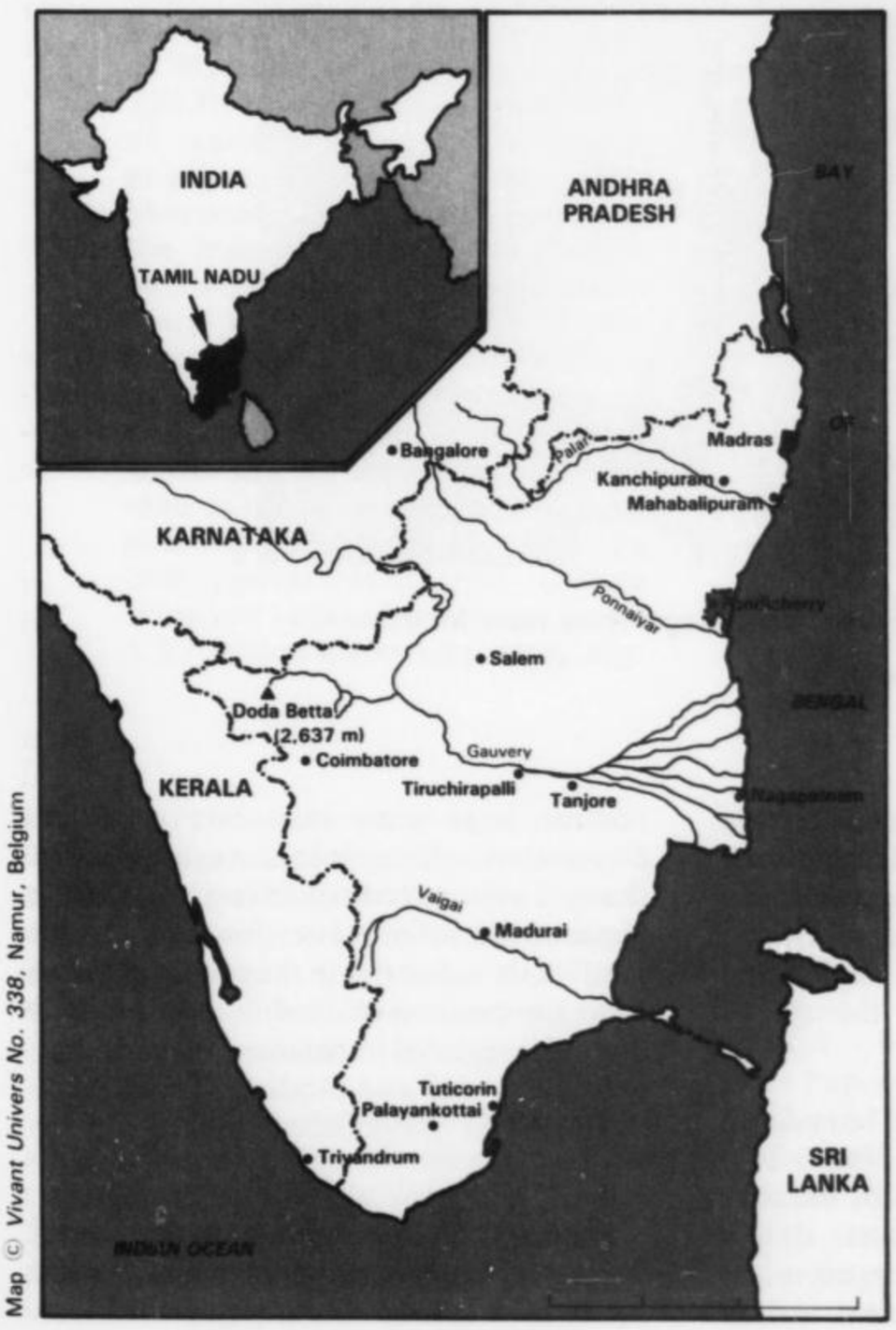
There are no large-circulation magazines catering for specialist tastes and preferences and serious writers have to find another forum in the small-circulation magazines.

A far more influential medium in Tamil is the cinema (see box page 11). More than a sixth of the total number of permanent theatres in India are in Tamil Nadu. This gives some indication both of the extent of rural electrification (99 per cent of all towns, villages and hamlets have been electrified) and of the penetration of the cinema into rural areas.

The popularity of the cinema is maintained and increased by the popular magazines. Similarly the commercial channel of the government-controlled radio is dominated by film music and programmes on films.

In Tamil Nadu the demands of the film world gave birth to a "poster-culture". When talkies were introduced, the popula- ▶

MILESTONES IN TAMIL HISTORY



Map © Vivant Univers No. 338, Namur, Belgium

***THE* TAMIL LANGUAGE** *is the official language of the State of* **TAMIL NADU** *(population over 48 million) in southeast India and is also spoken by some 4 million people living in Sri Lanka, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, as well as parts of east and south Africa and islands in the Indian Ocean, the South Pacific and the Caribbean. There is a scholarly literature in Tamil dating back to the early centuries of the Christian era. The language is of* **DRAVIDIAN** *origin. The* **DRAVIDIANS** *were the founders of one of the world's most ancient civilizations, which already existed in India sometime before 1000 BC when the* **ARYANS** *invaded the sub-continent from the north. The Aryans, who spoke the* **SANSKRIT** *language, pushed the Dravidians down into south India. Today 8 of the languages of northern and western India (including Hindi) are of Sanskrit origin, but Sanskrit itself is only spoken by Hindu Brahman priests in temple worship and by scholars. In southern India, 4 languages of Dravidian origin are spoken today. Tamil is the oldest of these.*

THE HISTORY OF TAMIL NADU *begins with the 3 kingdoms,* **CHERA, CHOLA** *and* **PANDYA,** *which are referred to in documents of the 3rd century BC. Some of the kings of these dynasties are mentioned in* **SANGAM LITERATURE** *(see article page 32), and the age between the 3rd century BC and the 2nd century AD is called the* **SANGAM AGE.** *At the beginning of the 4th century AD the* **PALLAVAS** *established their rule with Kanchipuram as their capital. Their dynasty, which ruled continuously for over 500 years, left a permanent impact on the history of Tamil Nadu, which was during this period virtually controlled by the* **PALLAVAS** *in the north and the* **PANDYAS** *in the south.*

In the middle of the 9th century a **CHOLA** *ruler established what was to become one of India's most outstanding empires on account of its administrative achievements (irrigation, village development) and its contributions to art and literature.* **THE AGE OF THE CHOLAS** *is considered the golden age of Tamil history.*

Towards the end of the 13th century the Cholas were overthrown by the **LATER PANDYAS** *who ruled for about a century and were followed by the* **VIJAYANAGARA DYNASTY,** *whose greatest ruler was Krishnadeva Raya (1509-1529), and the* **NAYAKS** *of Madurai and Tanjore.* **THE COLONIAL AGE** *opened in the 17th century. In 1639 the British East India Company opened a trading post at the fishing village of Madraspatnam, today* **MADRAS,** *the capital of Tamil Nadu. In 1947, India achieved* **INDEPENDENCE.** *The overwhelming majority of the population of Tamil Nadu is* **HINDU,** *with active* **CHRISTIAN** *and* **MUSLIM** *minorities.*

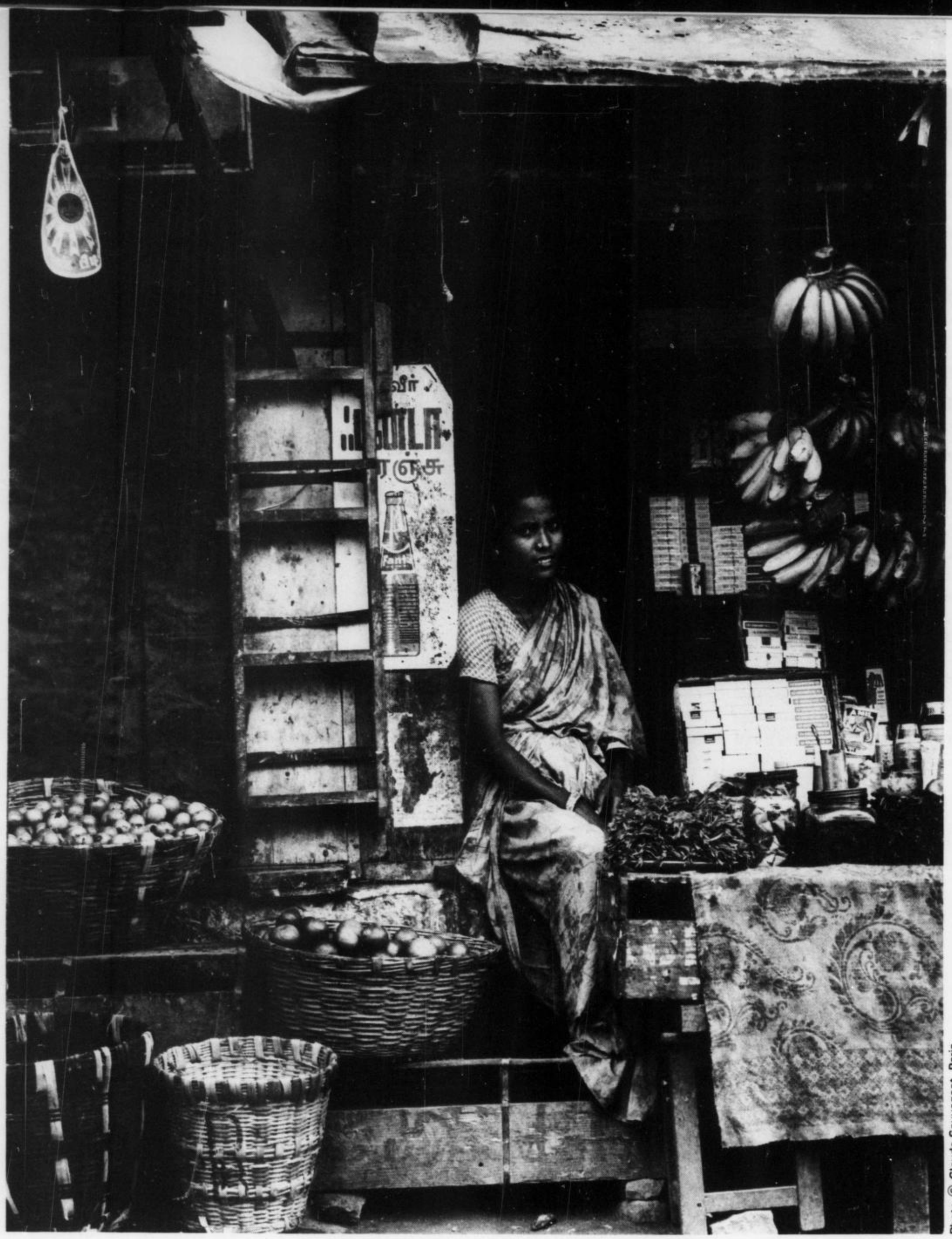


Photo © Atlas Photo, Paris

Photo © Claude Sauvageot, Paris

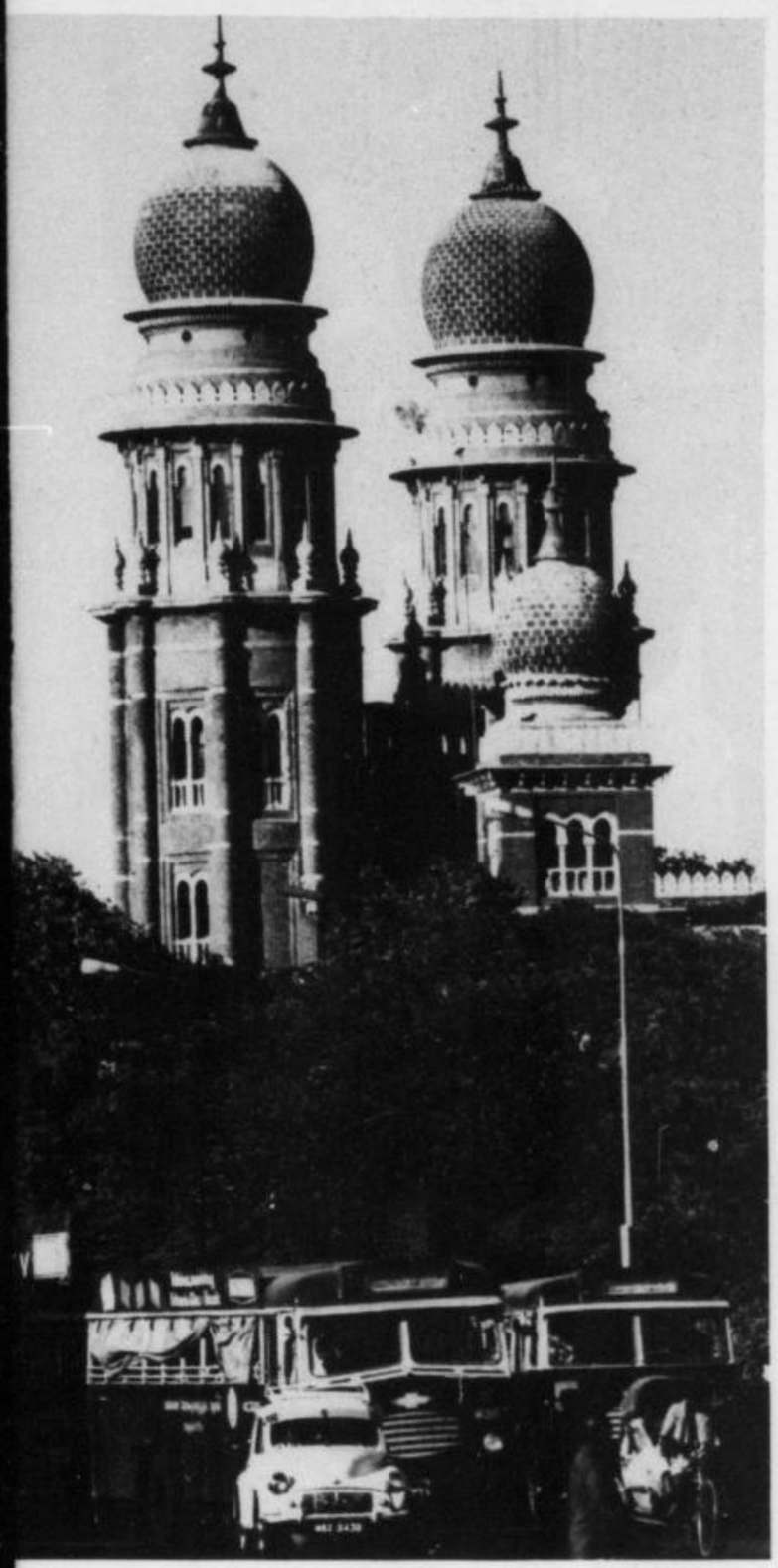
Cigarettes, betel leaves, fruit and soft drinks are the principal wares of this typical village shop near Madurai.

tion was largely illiterate and magazines were only just beginning to appear. Posters were the only major medium to announce new films. Now poster-oriented publicity has spread to other areas of public life and today one finds the walls of Tamil Nadu plastered with posters, with those for the cinema still the largest and most colourful.

The high rate of literacy and the degree of worker mobility have contributed to the process of industrialization in Tamil Nadu. As a result of a planned economic programme a wide range of industrial products are manufactured in Tamil Nadu creating an incredible range of industrial and consumer products and large-scale cement, fertilizer, refining and automobile industries. The latest addition is the construction of an atomic power plant to meet the energy needs of a growing society.

Textile and leather industries have traditionally been strong in Tamil Nadu. Two major ports cater for the needs of industry and a well-organized transport system keeps people and goods on the move. In order to create local employment and to prevent large scale migration to cities, dispersal of industry is encouraged by a well thought out system of incentives. A big chain of industrial estates for medium and small-scale industries in the non-traditional areas has been established in an attempt to minimize regional imbalances. Thus both in technology and end-products Tamil Nadu has revealed pronounced adaptability to change.

Industrialization has brought about dramatic change in peoples' life styles and mode of working. Farm equipment, fer-



Above, street scene in Madras (Chennai to Tamil-speakers), capital of Tamil Nadu and the fourth largest city in India: in the background, the imposing towers of Madras University (founded in 1857). With its advanced centres of research in plant pathology, physics, biophysics and Indian philosophy, Madras University is the hub of a rapidly expanding educational system. Economic activity is aided by an effective transport system and high population mobility. Tamil Nadu is one of the very few States in India in which almost every village has a road or rail link. Some 6,000 local and express buses, operated by both government and private transport agencies, cover some 1.27 million kilometres every day.

ranging from pressure cookers to grinders have replaced traditional modes of cooking, offering new leisure opportunities to the housewife in a family structure which has changed much.

Industrialization brings in its wake urbanization. Tamil Nadu has the second highest urban population in India. The migration of rural populations to the town and the transformation of rural areas into new industrial, urban areas continue unabated. This has brought about enormous pressure on space in the urban areas.

Housing is becoming more and more difficult; open spaces are filled with concrete blocks; slums are growing; sanitary conditions crumble under the impact; water facilities are becoming inadequate; children have less space to play. Traditional house architecture is disappearing and today, flats, with their cell-like rooms and limited moving space are the reality. Although the Government is making efforts to alleviate the problem through housing and slum clearance programmes, the requirements are fast outstripping the efforts.

These changed conditions have resulted in a need to adapt traditional modes to the new constraints. Women are more free and have better opportunities to get education and jobs. However, they continue to be bound by traditional tasks and modes of behaviour such as looking after the home and maintaining a distance from men. Even

dividuals' chart (see photo story page 8).

Religion continues to be a dominant force in the lives of Tamils. In fact, one observes a more pronounced increase in the interest in religion and occult beliefs. At a time when the average man's life is determined by economic motives and security, this may be the new kind of insurance he seeks against economic and physical insecurity.

Observance of religious ceremonies is marked among the newly educated, employed population—both men and women. The spread of electronics is helping religious activity; cassettes, discs and microphones have invaded places of worship. Educated middle-class housewives organize *bhajan* (worship through song) groups in towns and it is not an uncommon sight to see women commuters on their way to work absorbed in the reading of simple *stotras* (poems in praise of deities). No important function, domestic or business is organized without consulting the almanach and fixing an auspicious hour. Magazines pour out information on the movements of astral bodies and their effect on the average Tamil's life.

Was the traditional culture of the Tamils merely the culture of a particular class? Whether in literature, music or philosophy, was the thinking that of the dominant group? It is said that Sangam literature does not mention caste differences, but the majority of people can have had little access to

Photo © Vasantha Kumal, Madras

Tamils are avid readers of newspapers and magazines. Some one and three-quarter million copies of eight popular magazines are sold each week and among urban Tamil adults 42 per cent regularly read a daily newspaper and 46 per cent a weekly magazine.

tilizers and micro-nutrients have altered the agricultural scene. Increasing numbers of farmers are installing motor-pumps to draw water, dispensing with traditional methods and, in the process, sweeping away into disuse and oblivion their charming and evocative work songs.

The electronics industry with its transistors, stereos and television sets has changed the rural landscape, offering new forms of entertainment and providing employment to increasing numbers of school-leaving girls. Domestic appliances

in Madras city, there are still State Government buses meant exclusively to carry women during peak hours.

Marriage as an institution is a good example of how tradition and modernity can co-exist or be a source of friction. Marriage is an important event in the life of an individual in any society, but in Tamil Nadu it reveals a great deal about Tamil society's attitude to the man-woman relationship and its place in society. Most marriages are still arranged by the parents and determined by the astral bodies governing the in-

the cultivated arts and the conceptual levels of religion.

Independence brought a greater sense of social equality and an opportunity for the majority to express itself. With rapid economic and technological progress and the acceptance of values dictated by urban societies, there is a danger that indigenous culture may be gradually eroded. It is essential that popular forms of expression and ways of life do not disappear and that the true essence of Tamil culture shall survive.

■ S. Ramakrishnan

Photo © Raghavendra Rao, Madras

Mass weddings are a comparatively recent phenomenon and are part of an attempt to reduce the heavy cost of getting married. Above, a mass wedding in Madras begins with music played on the *nagasvaram*, a metre-long wood-wind instrument with a double reed fitted in the mouthpiece. No festival or other auspicious occasion is complete without the music of the nagasvaram, whose powerful tone can carry as far as two or three kilometres. Many nagasvaram players come from families that have specialized in the instrument for generations.

GETTING MARRIED

In Tamil Nadu most marriages are still arranged by parents and intercaste marriages, although no longer rare, are still the exception rather than the rule. Child marriage is now a thing of the past.

Economic status and caste are crucial factors in the process of selecting a marriage partner. Marriage is an expensive business and the bride's family usually has to meet all the expenses as well as providing a dowry. To parents with several daughters this financial burden is a source of constant worry.

Paradoxically, the education of women has added to the problem. In many castes an educated girl can only marry a man with an equal or better education, but the better educated the bridegroom is the higher the dowry the bride has to bring. For many middle-class families education and employment for women has meant that woman have to earn their own dowries! In earlier days the dowry consisted of cash and jewellery, but today it may include such modern items as scooters, refrigerators, television sets and pressure cookers.

In the past weddings were big social events spread over five days. Today the ceremony is completed in a little over one day. Weddings are no longer celebrated at home but are performed in rented halls. Government legislation on civil marriage has made things easier for those who want to keep things simple and laws have been passed to facilitate intercaste marriages. For those who, either from conviction or for the sake of convenience, want to dispense with ceremonies the Government has introduced a Self-Respect Marriage Act which validates marriages solemnized in non-traditional fashion.

In the Hindu religion the wedding ceremony is the most important of the samskaras (sacraments). The date is arranged in accordance with careful astrological calculations. At one point in the ceremony the bridegroom takes his bride by the hand and leads her round a sacrificial fire to solemnize their new and irrevocable union. Finally the newly-weds are taken in procession to their new home. It is customary for a married couple to renew their vows at a second ceremony held when the bridegroom reaches the age of sixty.

■ **S. Ramakrishnan**

Photo © Raghavendra Rao, Madras

Photo © Marie-Louise Reiniche, Paris

It is customary for married couples to renew their wedding vows at a ceremony held on the husband's sixtieth birthday. Offerings are made round a sacrificial fire and water from consecrated pitchers is poured through a sieve and sprinkled over the couple. The wife traditionally receives a second *tali*, or wedding jewel.

Seated on her father's lap, a young bride waits for the *mangalyam* (the sacred thread on which is suspended the *tali*, or wedding jewel) to be fastened around her neck. This is a crucial moment in the wedding ceremony when the bride passes from the control of her parents and comes under the protection of her husband.

4

Singing a soft lullaby a Madras grandmother rocks the baby to sleep in a traditional Tamil hammock-cradle.

Photo © Faivre, Paris

Scenes from everyday life

by Sundara Ramaswamy

TAMIL people today have a way of life that carries them back and forth over twenty centuries. When a young Tamil with a doctorate in atomic science from a famous American university advertises for a bride in the matrimonial columns of a Madras English-language daily, he mentions his caste and sub-caste and asks a suitable girl with the height and waistline he desires to write to him immediately—enclosing a horoscope. And since computers are now used for casting horoscopes there need be no delay.

On the day of *Ayudha Pooja*, the annual festival at which craftsmen honour the tools of their trade, surgeons who perform open-heart surgery will put a *kumkumam* mark on their minute, high-precision equipment.

Village, town, city: each has its own pace and style of life. Morning begins much earlier in the cities and villages than in the small towns. In the villages this is a natural and in the cities an enforced inconvenience. ▶

SUNDARA RAMASWAMY *is a leading contemporary Tamil poet and novelist.*

Photo © *Vivant Univers*, Namur, Belgium

Village scene in western Tamil Nadu.

▶ In the cities a generation may still survive which remembers the sound—that wonderful sound—of milk squirting into empty metal pots from the teats of cows and buffaloes. The milk sound, the sound of cow bells, the sound of hoofs, the rattle of horns, the rustle of straw, the clatter of milk cans on the ground—the only sound like these in the cities today is that of bicycle bells. In the city milk is left on the doorstep in plastic sachets, and the customer does not even see the face of the girl who delivers it. Alas, the alarm has been set too late for that. Beside the milk is the morning newspaper, and soon the odour of coffee and news will be in the air. While reading his newspaper and drinking his coffee, the prudent householder will remember to turn on the tap and fill his pots and pans with water. The water supply may continue to flow all day... but then again it may not.

In the city as in the village, the first thing the housewife should do when she has taken her morning bath is to draw the traditional *kolam* sign in front of her door (see photos page 31). I still remember forty years later how my grandmother once accusingly pointed out to her daughter-in-law that although it was already noon she had still not drawn the *kolam*. (In fact the sun had only just risen). In those days the *kolam* was drawn with rice flour; today it is traced with white lime powder. Over the years it has become accepted that a housewife can draw the *kolam* after merely washing her face, provided that she has applied the *kumkumam* and arranged her hair above her forehead.

Methods of cooking have changed. There has been a real revolution in the kitchen. Yesterday gas stoves, electric grinders, pressure-cookers, hot-plates and refrigerators were possessions of the rich; today middle-class people aspire to them. Working housewives are discovering time-saving strategies in the kitchen. The menfolk and the children will have to learn to do their bit in the morning hustle and bustle.

From eight o'clock in the morning onwards the sparrows start to fly away from every home. First the little sparrows, then the big sparrows. Then the house subsides into a great calm. Now, if anyone rings the doorbell, the door will usually be kept firmly shut. Even if it is opened, it will only be to a width of four fingers, and an elderly face, frightened by the sound of its own non-committal reply, will close the door upon itself.

Crowded buses and trains. Even if a seat is vacant, tradition still requires that a woman should not sit beside a man nor a man beside a woman. While boarding, however, men and women inevitably jostle one another in the crush. They are bound to bump into one another while standing or moving down the aisle. But for the time being they have decided not to sit side by side. Some humorous conductors crack jokes and make the passengers laugh, helping to dispel the nervousness that has been rising into the mind like poison ever since daybreak.

The evenings are starting to belong to the television, which the middle class has welcomed with open arms. For all practical purposes the television is simply the cinema that has entered the home; films that have already been seen at the cinema get a second showing in the drawing room. Groups of children from neighbouring families are sitting on the floor in front of the set. They know what is going to happen next on the screen, and shout out the emotion-packed dialogue being breathlessly delivered by hero or heroine, delighted to beat the actors to the end of each sentence. Not that television has depleted the cinema audiences; even for midday shows long queues can be seen waiting outside the cinemas in the scorching sun.

Women attend the free meetings held by religious preachers. When these erudite religious scholars intersperse epic stories with examples of behaviour drawn from everyday life, from the cinema, and from politics in order to show how the ancient virtues have fallen into neglect, the people in the audience can find tearful consolation in relating the trials and tribulations of their own lives to the general decline in values.

The men, and more so the women, also flock to the plays put

on by the *Sabha*, local cultural associations. They rock with laughter at the crackling jokes, secretly weep with the heroine when she bewails the sorrows besetting her, and share her joy when her problems disappear like mist driven away by the sunshine. Then they return home, glad to have found an outlet for their mental tensions.

For those who do not want to go out or who cannot afford to do so, there are the weekly and monthly magazines to be read. These magazines contain adventure stories, love stories with a social or historical background told with bubbling enthusiasm and ending with a strong insistence on the moral virtues, titbits of information, revelations about politicians and film stars, as well as light poetry and essays. Tamils who do not feel some mental bond with these magazines or who do not glance at them at least once a day are few and far between.

Sunday is a wonderful day. Sunday mornings are for routine jobs and the afternoons for more spiritual satisfaction. Piles of clothes must be mended, washed, ironed and put away. The bank must be visited (banks are open on Sundays in residential areas). Certain skills must be brought into play to obtain from ration-shops slightly higher quantities of scarce grains, low-fat vegetable oils (sought-after not because of their low cholesterol but because of their low price), sugar and/or kerosene. Grain must be pounded and ground. Then, after applying oil to the head, it is time for a leisurely bath with careful rinsing of the hair, followed by a siesta to squeeze out the last drop of body fatigue. In the afternoon, a film or a trip to the beach or to a friend's house. And so on and so forth... When Sunday dawns there are so many plans and projects nagging at the mind. If you listen to the voice of physical fatigue that says "Not today, not today", and you stay in bed, then the family is done for. Even if you get up briskly and chase after time's fleeting chariot and rush through your chores, time's chariot somehow manages to keep ahead and when it disappears into darkness not even a quarter of the work is done. Every Sunday it is like this. You think back and remember the careless mistakes you have made, the things you have forgotten to do. Next Sunday you must try even harder.

The gap between cities and villages has narrowed. Efficient and steadily improving road transport is helping to bring people together. The expanding city suburbs are reaching out to the villages.

The village revolves around agriculture. It is very early in the morning when the men and women of the village set out to work in the fields or gardens. There is no time to prepare breakfast, nor any modern time-saving kitchen equipment. If there are any left-overs from the previous night's food the villagers swallow a mouthful before they leave. It is becoming a custom to drink a cup of tea on the way to work. In the villages few parents devote much time or trouble to getting their children off to school; the children must fend for themselves.

Changing fashions are also reaching the villages. Touring theatre companies have become very common. Electricity has brought lighting. It has also brought the blare of loudspeakers. Simple make-up accessories and new kinds of dresses are finding a place in village life. The villagers are obsessed by films and politics, even though their lives are not dependent on them. In the little shops, at the hairdresser's, and under the trees, people gather and discuss the cinema and politics. The two fields are not unrelated. Yesterday's film personalities are today active in politics. Today's cinema people may go into politics at any moment.

It would be wrong to say that the old life-style in the villages has completely disappeared. Time once went by at snail's pace; now it has started to walk; but it does not yet run. Leisurely conversation can still be heard on the *thinnai*, the verandahs of the houses. In rivers and ponds women take their time to bathe. Women still carry pots of drinking water on their hips. The harmony that once existed everywhere between men and other living creatures continues to exist in the villages. There are cows, buffaloes, chickens and dogs. The grinding mills still turn in the homes, the pestle still rotates in the mortar. Healthy women still pound paddy with heavy pounding rods. Boiled paddy is spread outside in the street in front of the door.

The sun still rises over the village. Leave the house, walk across the fields, look to the far horizon and feel the mountain breeze like the soft touch of children.

■ **Sundara Ramaswamy**

A BOOMING FILM INDUSTRY

Photo © Raghavendra Rao, Madras

Poster for a film entitled "Skanda's Pardon" (Skanda, also known as Murugan, is the son of Siva and the Hindu god of war). In the foreground, a young lottery ticket vendor.

The cinema is perhaps the most powerful, and certainly the most popular, of the media in Tamil Nadu. Film stars wield great influence over the public. Fan clubs (strangely enough only for male actors, not for actresses) are common, each with a large membership. Club members promote their favourite stars and try to keep them in the spotlight of public attention. They publicize the release of new films in which their idols appear, celebrate their birthdays and garland their cut-out portraits and banner advertisements outside cinemas.

Films have been produced in Tamil Nadu for over seventy years and the film industry is now huge (487 films released in 1982 alone) with a sophisticated production and distribution network and employing a large work force. As technology has improved, black and white films have become rare (only two black and white films released in 1982) with the public demanding colour films.

The content of films is largely shaped by popular tastes. Although for a while, with the advent of the talkies, films became a powerful tool for the propagation of the nationalist message and, later, the ideals of the "self-respect" movement, no such tendency is now discernible. Today almost every film has love as its main theme. There has been a shift away from studio-oriented production and towards location filming in rural surroundings, but the ingredients have remained the same—boy meets girl, violence and, inserted willy-nilly into the fabric of every production, the theme of "honour". The beauty of the landscape is emphasized, lovers express their emotions in dance and song and fighting scenes are scattered throughout and usually provide the climax.

■ **S. Ramakrishnan**

RICE AND RITUAL
The Tamil art of cooking

by Thilaka Baskaran

Photo © *Vivant Univers*, Namur, Belgium

To prepare food for their families village women use two age-old devices for milling and grinding—the saddle quern (a round stone rolled or rubbed on a flat stone) and, visible in the background, a pestle and mortar.

SANGAM literature paints a vivid picture of the social life of the ancient Tamils and provides the historical background for their eating habits. In the Sangam poems (see article page 32) land is classified into five geographical areas and the food related to each area is described.

Many inscriptions chiselled on the walls of temples reveal how food habits and religious practices became intertwined. These epigraphs give an idea of the role of food in rituals, as sacrificing, cooking, dedicating and feasting all became part of worship. Not eating... fasting, also emerged as a ritual.

By the 11th-12th century AD, caste groups had appeared with distinct lines of demarcation, and the eating habits of each caste began to assume different characteristics. (The culinary profile of the castes can still be noted by the careful observer). Such issues as "who can serve whom?" and "from whom can one accept food?" became significant in the context of caste structure. Depending upon the degree to which a caste was "Sanskritized", it became vegetarian or non-vegetarian. A tradition of vegetarianism, which was largely absent from ancient Tamil Nadu began to emerge, mainly as a result of the popularity of Buddhism and Jainism.

THILAKA BASKARAN, *is a Tamil nutritionist and college lecturer.*

Over the years, certain interesting concepts in food appeared. Taste was classified into six groups, and all food commodities were divided into two broad categories, hot and cold. The whole of Tamil cuisine is still largely based on this classification which also influenced indigenous medicinal practices: illnesses were classified as hot and cold and the diet therapy was based on treating with cold food those caused by heat and with hot food those caused by cold. This belief still persists. Chicken pox, for example, is believed to be a manifestation of body heat and the foods permitted are those that are supposed to counter this heat—fruit, butter milk and tender coconut.

Some of the recipes that were in use in the 1st century AD are still being followed today, pretty much unchanged. Cooking is elaborate and complex, and is considered to be a fine art. Treatises on cooking specify the size of the kitchen, the kind of stove to be used, the direction in which the stove is to face, and even the desirable characteristics of a cook (he should be "a native born of good caste, he should observe the cooking and eating taboos, not harbour any grudge, be absolutely clean in his habits, and always tie his long hair into a bun").

The everyday diet is fairly austere, consisting of boiled rice, *sambar* (dhal [lentils] vegetable and tamarind), fish or meat curry (for non-vegetarians), a vegetable *pugadh, rasam* (spicy pepper water) and curds. On special occasions *payasam*, a milk-based dessert flavoured with cardomom, is served.

Even in affluent families there is not much variety in the daily menu, but when there are guests or a wedding is held it is a totally different story, and a truly ambrosial meal will be produced. The food served on these occasions is an indication of the hosts' status.

Eating habits vary geographically and are shaped largely by what is grown in the different areas. In the riverine and delta regions, paddy, sugar cane, banana and coconut figure largely in the diet. In dry areas millets and grams are the major foodstuffs.

The delicate blending of herbs, condiments and spices is the touchstone of good cookery. The combination and quantity of spices used vary from family to family, providing subtle variations in taste. The contrast between opposing tastes is a recurring theme. Most of the popular dishes like *sambar, morekolumbu* (curds and spices with coconut) *pulikolumbu* (a spicy sour curry with vegetable and tamarind) and the red-hot fish and meat curry are all different combinations of sour and hot tastes.

The staple cereal in most parts of Tamil Nadu is, of course, rice, which is often eaten at all three meals. Breakfast in most middle class families consists of *idli* (a rice and dhal batter, steamed), *dosai* (the same batter fried like a pancake), *puttu* (a steamed rice-flour preparation served with coconut scrapings, banana, and sugar), *idiappam* (a rice-flour dough pressed through a mould to resemble vermicelli and steamed) or *appam* (a rice-flour and coconut delicacy fermented with toddy and cooked like a pancake).

In modern Tamil cuisine coffee has become one of the main drinks. Brewed from freshly roasted and ground beans, and served with plenty of milk and sugar, it is always drunk at breakfast. This method of coffee-making is holding its ground in all Tamil kitchens in the face of instant coffees promoted in the media.

Change in food habits is slow in coming to Tamil Nadu, but some signs of it can be seen. Wheat is being increasingly used in urban areas. *Chappathi* (wheat flour pancake) may be substituted for rice, especially for dinner, and *poori* (a deep-fried wheat pancake) and potato be served as breakfast.

Though stainless steel cutlery and crockery are used in urban homes, food is still served on ceremonial occasions in the traditional way—on a banana leaf. The leaf is spread in front of the diner, with the tip pointing left. Serving begins with salt and pickle being placed at the extreme left. The first course is sweet—everything has to begin with a sweet whether it is an infant's first solid meal or the newly-wed's first drink. The series of vegetable dishes, *pachadi* (a vegetable and curd salad) and the crisp *appalam,* all of which go with the various rice courses, are placed on the top half of the leaf. With every course the leaf is carefully replenished, the diner's protests being totally ignored. Even among non-vegetarians, ceremonial feasts are always vegetarian.

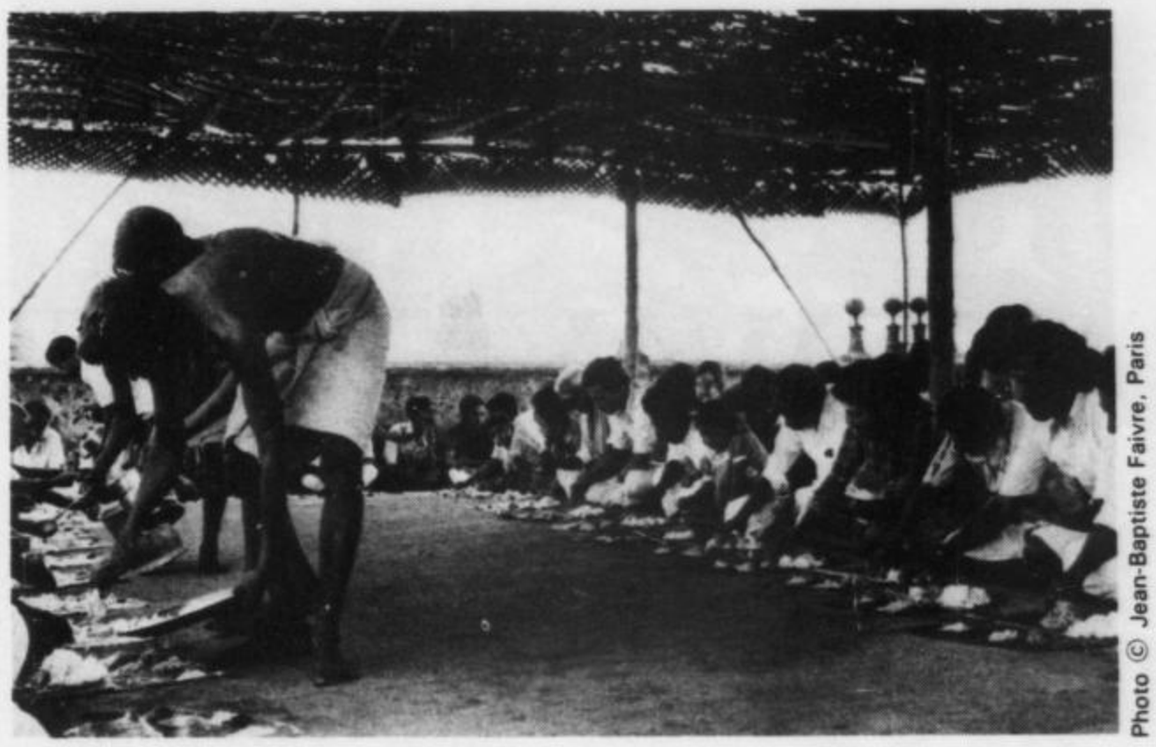


Photo © Jean-Baptiste Faivre, Paris

A celebratory meal being served to guests in the traditional manner on banana leaves (see article this page) on the occasion of the *upanayana,* or initiation, of the son of the household. During the initiation ceremony, which usually takes place around the age of twelve, the boy is invested with the "sacred thread", a loop of cotton cord placed over the left shoulder and falling diagonally across the body to the right hip. The thread, which the owner wears throughout his lifetime, being replaced annually, indicates that the wearer has joined the ranks of the *dvija,* or "twice-born".

Every festival and ceremony has a traditional menu. The first rice meal given to a baby in the seventh month is *sarkarai pongal,* a combination of rice-milk, sugar and ghee. The teething of a child calls for *pal koshukattai* (tiny rice flakes resembling teeth, cooked in milk with sugar). The coming of age of a daughter is an important family event, as it is in all traditional communities. Milk, banana and sugar are given to the girl and to all well-wishers who visit her. *Seemandam,* celebrated in the seventh or ninth month of pregnancy, calls for a variety of rice preparations.

Since Tamil Nadu is predominantly agricultural it is not surprising that the most important festival should be *pongal,* the harvest festival, which is celebrated at the beginning of the Tamil month of *Thai* (see box page 31). *Pongal,* which literally means "boiling over", symbolizes the farmer's overflowing prosperity. Newly decorated mud pots are used to cook dishes to fit the occasion, such as *sarkarai pongal* and *ven pongal.*

Modernization is slowly bringing changes to the culinary scene. Compromises and adaptations are being made. Traditional recipes that call for elaborate and leisurely cooking are disappearing. Processed foods such as ready-made *idli*-mix and pre-packed curry powders have invaded urban kitchens. Mechanical aids such as motorized *idli*-grinders are also being used in traditional cooking. The break-up of the joint family and the increase in the number of career women have inevitably changed some Tamil eating habits. A movement towards a simpler cuisine can be sensed. All the same, Tamil food practices and their cultural implications still retain their basic character.

■ **Thilaka Baskaran**

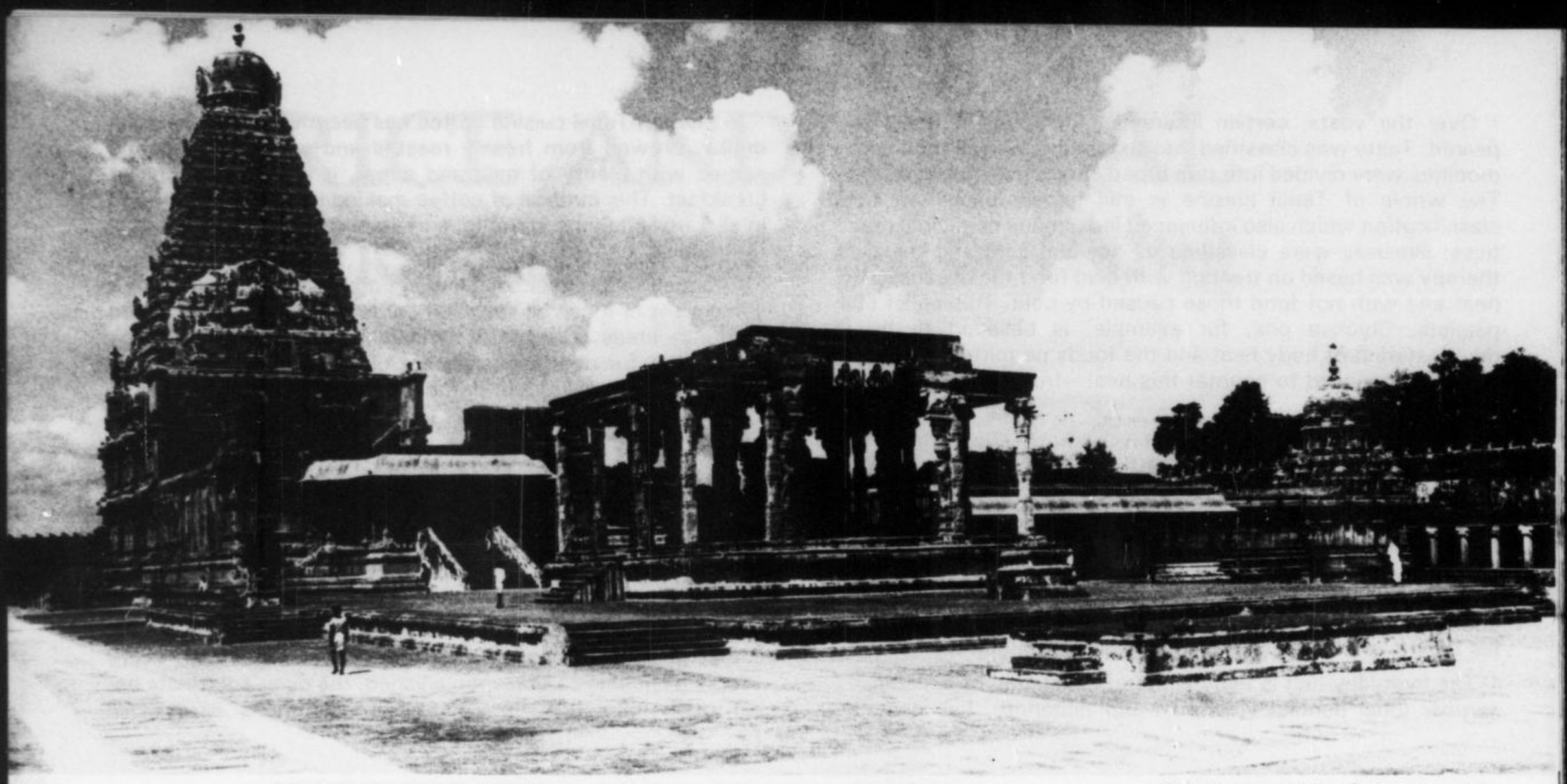


Photo Emmanuel Guillou © Atlas Photo, Paris

The great temple at Tanjore. Built entirely of granite this grandiose temple to Siva was erected during the reign of the great Chola monarch Raja Raja I (985 to 1014).

GATEWAY TO THE GODS

1. Sermons in stone

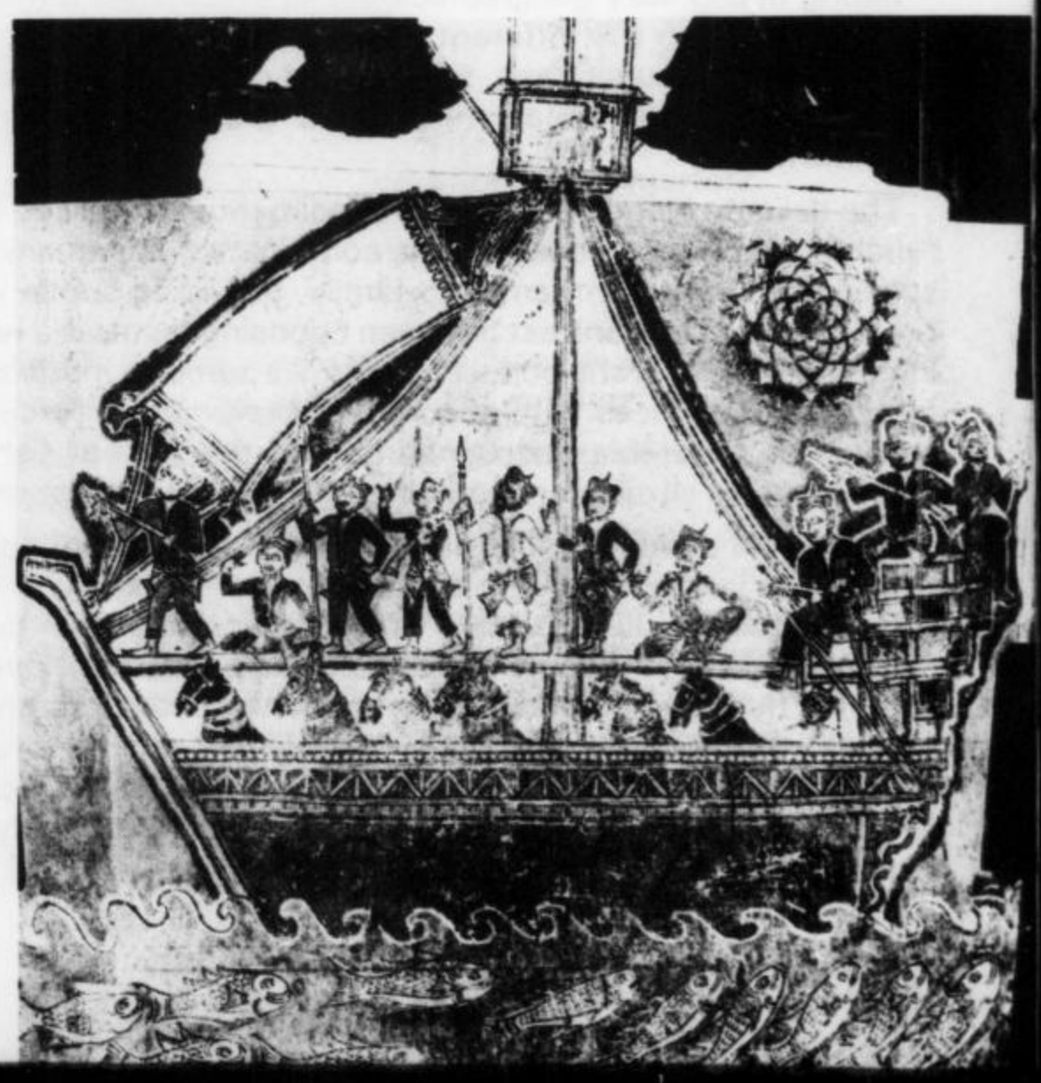
by R. Nagaswamy

FOR the past two thousand years the life of the Tamil people has centered on their temples with their lofty towers, elegant sculptures and remarkable bronzes.

A number of places in Tamil Nadu are said to be directly or indirectly connected with episodes in certain popular myths and legends relating to one or other of the divine manifestations of Siva, Vishnu, Subrahmanya, Durga and other gods. Places mentioned in epics and *puranas* (collections of legendary tales) assumed a sacred aura and were visited by a large number of devotees. While some such legends are pan-Indian in nature, most of them are purely Tamil in origin and in essence.

The Vishnu temple of Srirangam and the Siva temple of Ramesvaram are thus connected with the Ramayana epic. Rama worshipped Siva at Ramesvaram to purge his sin of having killed Ravana. Thiruchendur, a place sacred to Muruga, is believed to be the spot where Subrahmanya killed the demon Surapadma. The Meenakshi temple of Madurai is said to be the place where Siva performed sixty-four miraculous sports.

Temples were also built for the welfare



This 16th-century mural was discovered recently in the *gopuram* (entrance tower) of a temple in the district of Tirunelveli. It portrays the arrival from the Gulf of a ship laden with horses. The princes of southern India imported large numbers of horses from Persia and Arabia, despite their high cost; the king of Vijayanagar is reputed to have imported 13,000 horses annually for his own personal use and to provide mounts for his officers.

Photo © I.F.I., Pondicherry

R. NAGASWAMY *is a specialist in Tamil art and archaeology. He was curator for art and archaeology at the Madras Museum from 1959 until 1962 when he joined the State Archaeology Department, becoming its first director in 1966. He is the author of over a hundred books, articles and studies; his* Tantric Cults of South India *was published, in English, in 1982.*

of the people. An inscription at Mamallapuram records that a temple of Lord Siva was erected by the king to fulfil the desires of his subjects. Whenever a king settled his people in a new place, he erected a number of temples and arranged for worship for the well-being of the inhabitants. When Karikala, the celebrated Chola ruler of the Sangam period, established Uraiyur as his capital, in accordance with the instructions given in the ancient treatises he erected temples before building housing for his subjects. Temples were also often built in honour of rulers, parents, relatives or famous men.

The great majority of temples, however, were erected by kings, queens and nobles out of piety and devotion. Koccengannan, a Chola ruler of the Sangam period, erected seventy lofty temples to Siva as an act of devotion. The celebrated Pallava monarch Mahendravarnam I (590-630 AD) excavated a number of temples out of rock as an act of piety. "Having made this abode for the Lord Siva, whose image he has installed there, he bore the supreme Lord on his head", says an inscription of his at Tiruchirapalli. Indeed, Mahendra eventually assumed the title of *Mahachettakari*, or "Great Temple Builder". The great temple of Tanjore, built by the great Chola monarch Raja Raja I (985-1014 AD), was erected as an act of pious dedication.

Temples were also erected to honour the dead, either at the place of burial or in the form of memorials. After a period of mourning, the dead, it was believed, became celestial beings and were therefore to be worshipped. The erection of monumental structures for the dead can be found in very large numbers. Dolmens in particular played an important role in the evolution of temples to the dead and, in later periods, minor

Façade of the Sivaite temple of Minakshi at Madurai, the ancient capital of the Pandya dynasty. The city was totally destroyed in 1310 and the present temple dates from the 17th century. Our photo bears witness to the open-minded catholicity of the Hindu religion, for, although this is a Sivaite temple, the statue right portrays Vishnu who is seen astride his mount, the fabulous bird Garuda.

Photo © Claude Sauvageot, Paris

The interior of the Minakshi temple at Madurai. To the left can be seen Nandi, the bull mount of Siva, and, to the right, a statue of Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of Siva and Parvati. Crouched before him is his mount, a rat.

Photo © Claude Sauvageot, Paris

temples closely resembling dolmens are to be found. Often an image of the dead person appears on the back wall.

The form of worship in the temple is prescribed by ritual treatises called *Agamas* or *Tantra Sastras*. All agamic texts consist of four parts: *Caryapada, Kriyapada, Yogapada* and *Jnanapada*. The *Caryapada* deals with such things as the personal cleanliness, discipline and initiation of the worshipper. The mode of worship in the temple is treated under the *Kriyapada*. The *Yogapada* details the yogic path to be followed by the devotee. The *Jnanapada* is essential as it deals with the ultimate end of worship, culminating in the realization of knowledge and final emancipation and ▶

▶thus embodies the essential philosophic concepts of each sect.

The earlier *Agamas* are elaborate treatises dealing not only with temple ritual but also, in great detail, with such matters as the lay-out of villages and cities, the building of houses and temples, and the manufacture of utensils.

Temples dedicated to Gods like Siva, Vishnu, Durga and Jain and Buddhist deities existed during the Sangam period (approx. 300 BC to 200 AD), but they were mostly built of bricks, mortar and timber. Virtually nothing of that age has survived, although the remains of a fourth century AD Buddhist *chaitya* (temple proper) and *vihara* (monastery) have been unearthed at Kaveripattinam.

Stucco heads and torsos have also been found which attest to the continuation of the artistic tradition mentioned in early Tamil literature. By 600 AD, in the wake of the *Bhakti* (devotion) movement, several hundred temples dedicated to Siva and Vishnu had been erected and these were also brick and mortar constructions. King Mahendra Pallava I was a great builder as well as being an accomplished artist, composer and dramatist. He seems to have taken a keen interest in the art of painting and called himself *Chitrakarapuli*, or "Tiger among artists". To him are due several rock-cut cave temples carved out of small hills from Madras in the north to Thiruchi in the south.

His successors continued his work. Mamallapuram, near Madras, was established as a seaport in the middle of the seventh century by Mahendra's son Mamalla. Here Pallava artists lavished their skill on the carving of monolithic temples, the excavation of caves and on sculptural friezes carved on open rock faces. Around 700 AD, Pallava artists were encouraged by king Rajasimha Pallava to embellish with their carving as many caves and temples as possible. There are several monolithic temples including a group of five temples, known because of their shape and appearance as the Five *Rathas* (chariots), which are perfect examples of symmetry and careful planning and execution. They simulate the structural temples of the period, reproducing wooden elements, such as balustrades and beams, in stone.

As well as the monoliths there are over fifteen rock-cut temples in various stages of completion. Some are adorned with remarkable sculptures of Siva and the goddess Durga. A carving in the Mahishasuramardini cave temple portrays the goddess Durga seated on a prancing lion accompanied by dwarfs and female attendants. The goddess wields a bow and a sword and, facing her, a buffalo-headed demon is retreating vanquished. All his warriors are hastily withdrawing, some falling dead and others fleeing the battlefield. On the side of the sculpture depicting the goddess everything has a vigorous forward movement, while on the side of the *Asura* (demon-god) everything is falling. This is undoubtedly one of the greatest sculptural creations of India. Opposite this sculpture is another depicting Vishnu reclining in cosmic sleep on a serpent couch, a picture of composure and peace.

Another masterpiece at Mamallapuram is the great panel carved on a rock face depicting "The Penance of Arjuna". A central fissure in the rock is visualized as the celestial river Ganga descending from heaven to earth and falling down to the nether world. Surrounded by celestial beings, hunters, musicians and other figures, as well as animals and birds, Arjuna, the hero of the Mahabharata, performs a penance under the eyes of Lord Siva. The herd of elephants at the bottom of the panel is perhaps the most outstanding animal sculpture in Indian art.

Nearby is another sculpture portraying Krishna holding the mount Govardhana beneath which cowherds and their cows are taking shelter. The cow and the calf in

CONTINUED PAGE 18

This 13th-century sculpture from the Vishnu temple at Srinangam echoes the imagery of many Vishnavite poems in which the devout soul is visualized as a young girl longing for union with the Supreme Being, personified as her lover.

Dwarfs dance in ecstasy in this frieze adorning the base of the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram. The temple, sacred to Siva, was built by the Pallava king Rajasimha in about 725 AD.

Photos © R. Nagaswamy, Madras

THE TEMPLE SCULPTURES OF MAMALLAPURAM

The temple complex at Mamallapuram, on the coast some 80 kilometres south of Madras, is one of the great architectural and sculptural achievements of the Pallava dynasty (4th to 9th century). The most impressive work is the huge panel carved on a rock face known variously as "The Penance of Arjuna" or "The Descent of the Ganga". Near the centre of the panel Arjuna, a hero of the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata,* performs a penance to Siva. Beside Arjuna, a fissure in the rock represents the celestial river Ganga descending from heaven to earth. Stretching out on either side of the central fissure are magnificent sculptures of deities, sprites, saints, musicians, hunters and townsfolk (see detail right) and of animals (detail below) and birds, all of whom have come to witness the Ganga's miraculous descent. In a nearby cavern are sculpted scenes from the lives of Vishnu. Bottom right, Vishnu is depicted milking a cow, in his 8th avatar as Krishna the Shepherd-King. In the same cavern another sculpture depicts Krishna holding up mount Govardhana to protect shepherds and their flocks from the wrath of his rival Indra. Bottom, also at Mamallapuram is a group of monolithic temples known as "The Five *Rathas*" (chariots) since they resemble in shape the chariots on which deities are carried in procession at festivals. Dedicated to the Pandava heroes of the *Mahabharata* and their common wife Draupadi, they were hewn out of rock during the reign of Mamalla Pallava (630 to 668) who gave his name to Mamallapuram.

Photo © Claude Sauvageot, Paris

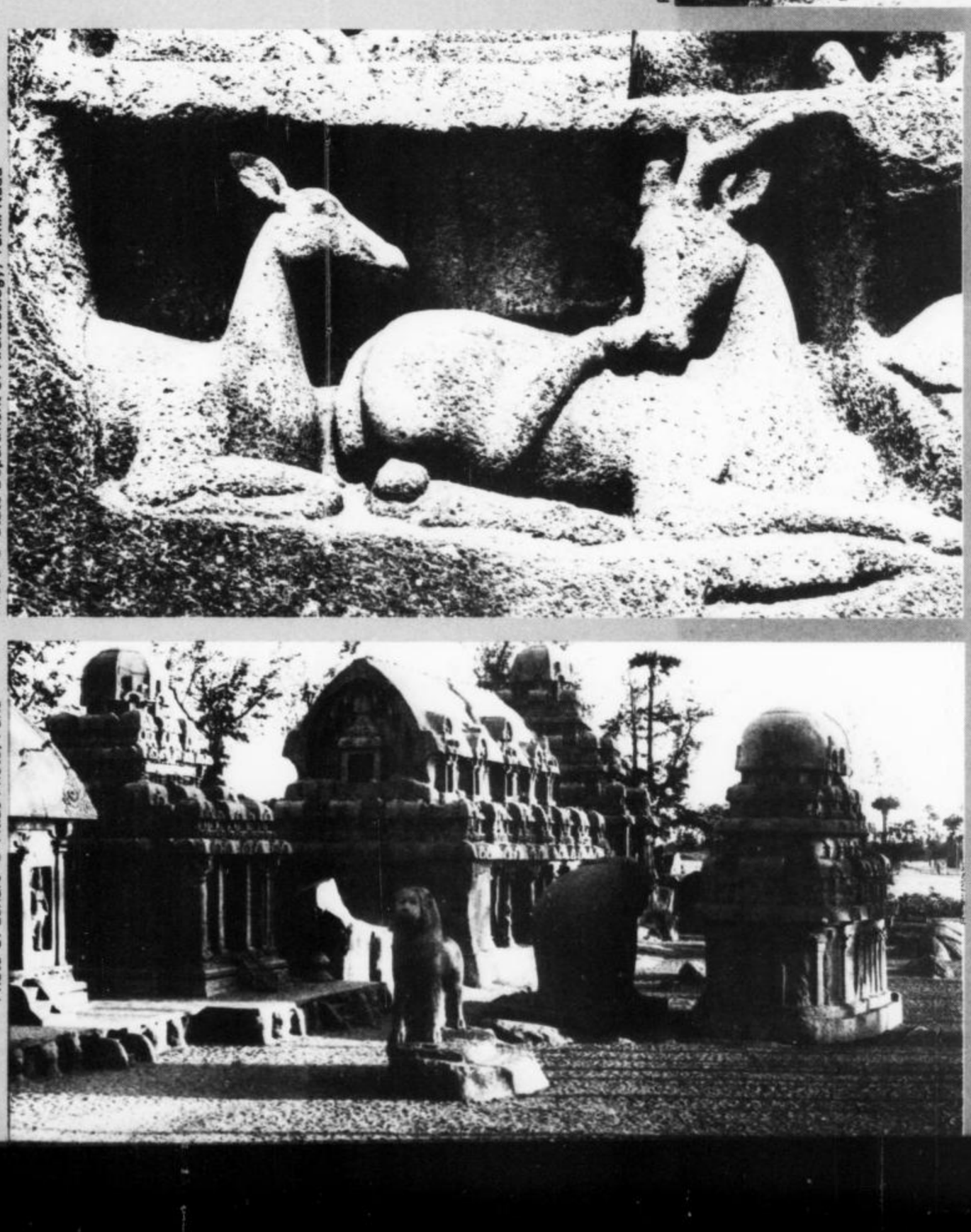


Photo © State Department of Archaeology, Tamil Nadu

Photo © Paul Almasy, Paris

Photo C. Lenars © Atlas Photo, Paris

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16

the group are another example of the Pallava artists' ability to portray animals vibrant with life. Mamallapuram is a treasure-house of the sculptor's art and must rank among the great centres of classic world art.

The rise to dominance of the Chola dynasty in the ninth century brought a change in architectural style. Most of the structural temples were of modest height and built of granite. Special attention was paid to the structure of the sanctum in which fine sculptures of gods and goddesses were placed in appropriate niches as prescribed in the ritual treatises. Despite their modesty, their simplicity and elegant proportions are arresting.

Within a century, these unpretentious beginnings were to culminate in the construction of perhaps the greatest of all temples in southern Indian style, built by king Raja Raja Chola (985 to 1014). Some 85 metres in height and built entirely of granite, the temple at Tanjore is a marvel of symmetry and structural design. Everything about it is grandiose. Even the five-metre-high monolithic sculpture of the *dwarapalas* (guardians of entrances) pales into insignificance in the grandeur of the architecture whose upward thrust overwhelms the visitor. Raja Raja's son, Rajendra Chola, built a similar temple at his capital Gangaikonda-cholapuram and the Chola royal temples at Darasuram and Tirubhuvanam, near Kumbhakonam, are edifices of great beauty.

Chola art differed from that of the Pallava period in that the Cholas were essentially great architects whereas Pallava artists specialized in delicate, expressive sculpture. By the twelfth century a new trend began to emerge. Enclosure walls and lofty entrance towers known as *gopuram* were built at all the important temples and *mandapas* (halls) with from 100 to 1,000 slender pillars were built for festive purposes.

From the sixteenth century, the entrance towers were built to greater heights, up to sixty metres, and became the most important feature of Hindu temples. The Vijayanagara Emperor Krishna Devaraya (1509 to 1529) built several such towers at places like Chidambaram, Kanchipuram, Kalahasti and Thiruvannamalai. So imposing were they that all entrance towers came to be known as *Rayagopura* (royal towers). The ground floors of these towers were built of stone and the entire superstructure was of brick and mortar, painted and studded with hundreds of stucco figures, a trend that continues to this day.

■ **R. Nagaswamy**

Colour pages

Page 19

Top: A village hero-god surrounded by offerings in the form of statues and terra cotta horses (see article and photo story page 28).

Bottom left: Tridents, swords and spears are often planted in the ground in front of representations of hero-gods as a tribute to their courageous spirit.

Photos © S. Baskaran, Madras

Bottom right: Snakes rise up and sway to the music of the snake-charmer's flute. This terra-cotta statue may possibly be a representation of Pampatti Cittar, a 15th-century poet. Pampatti means "Dance, serpent, dance!" a phrase with which he used to sign off all his writings. The Cittar were poets and writers of the ancient popular tradition, some of whose works have survived in anthologies of popular Tamil poetry. They wrote about alchemy, medicine and yoga as well as magic or miraculous powers. The great modern Tamil poet Subrahmanya Bharati (1882 to 1921) used to claim to be the latest in the long line of Cittar poets.

Photo © R. Nagaswamy, Madras

Centre pages

Page 20

Top: Detail of the great rock sculpture of the Pallava period known as *The Penance of Arjuna* (see photos and caption page 17). It depicts a man wringing out a garment or a piece of cloth he has washed in the holy waters of the River Ganga.

Bottom: Head of Siva, detail from a late Pallava (9th century) bronze sculpture depicting the marriage of Siva and Parvati (see photo page 24).

Photos © R. Nagaswamy, Madras

Page 21

Top left: Cinema-going is one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Tamil Nadu and colourful posters, like this one advertising a matinée performance, are a feature of the Madras street scene. (See box page 11).

Photo © Jean-Baptiste Faivre, Paris

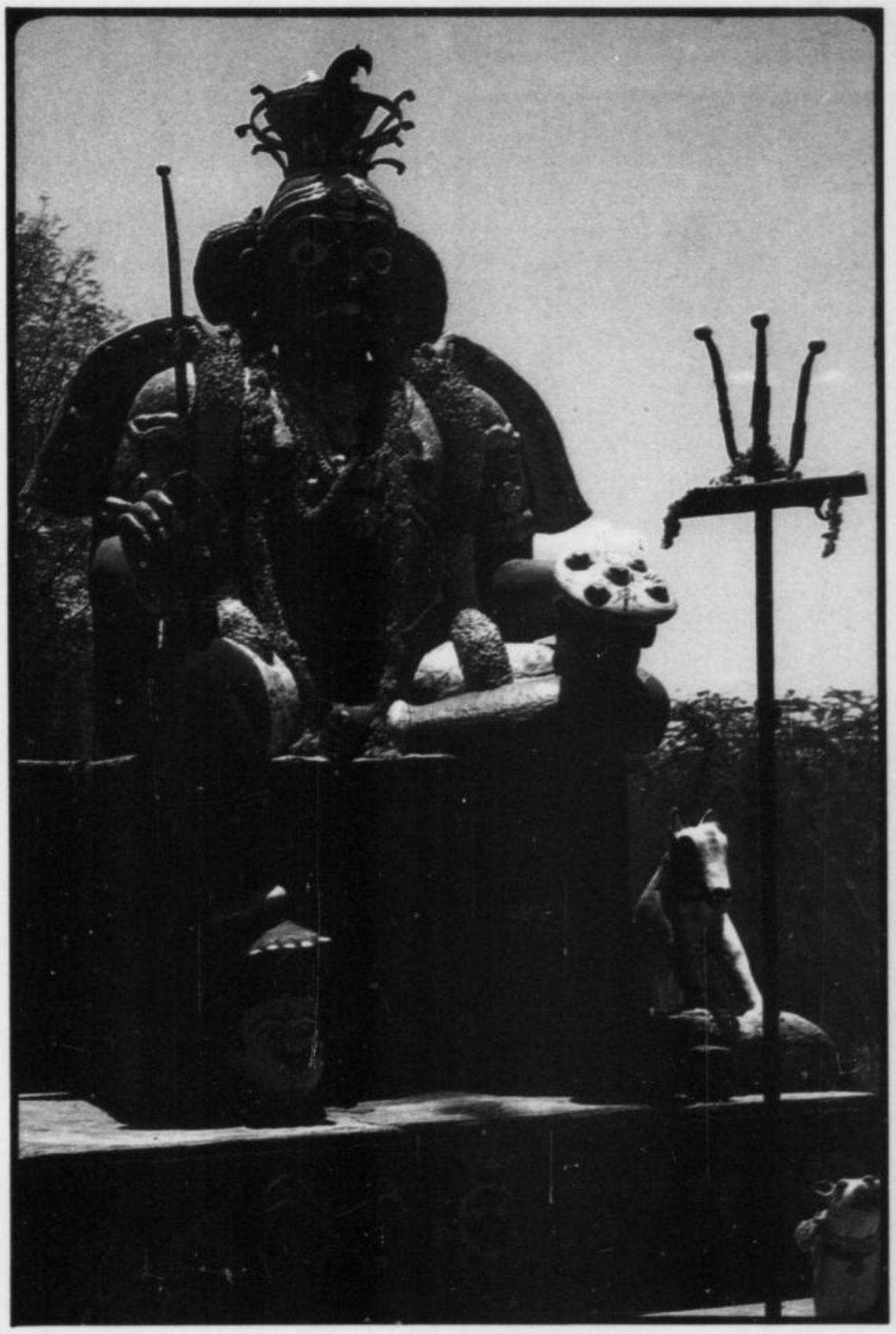
Bottom left: Detail of a late Pallava period fresco depicting Parvati, the consort of Siva, at the Talagirisvara temple, Panamalai.

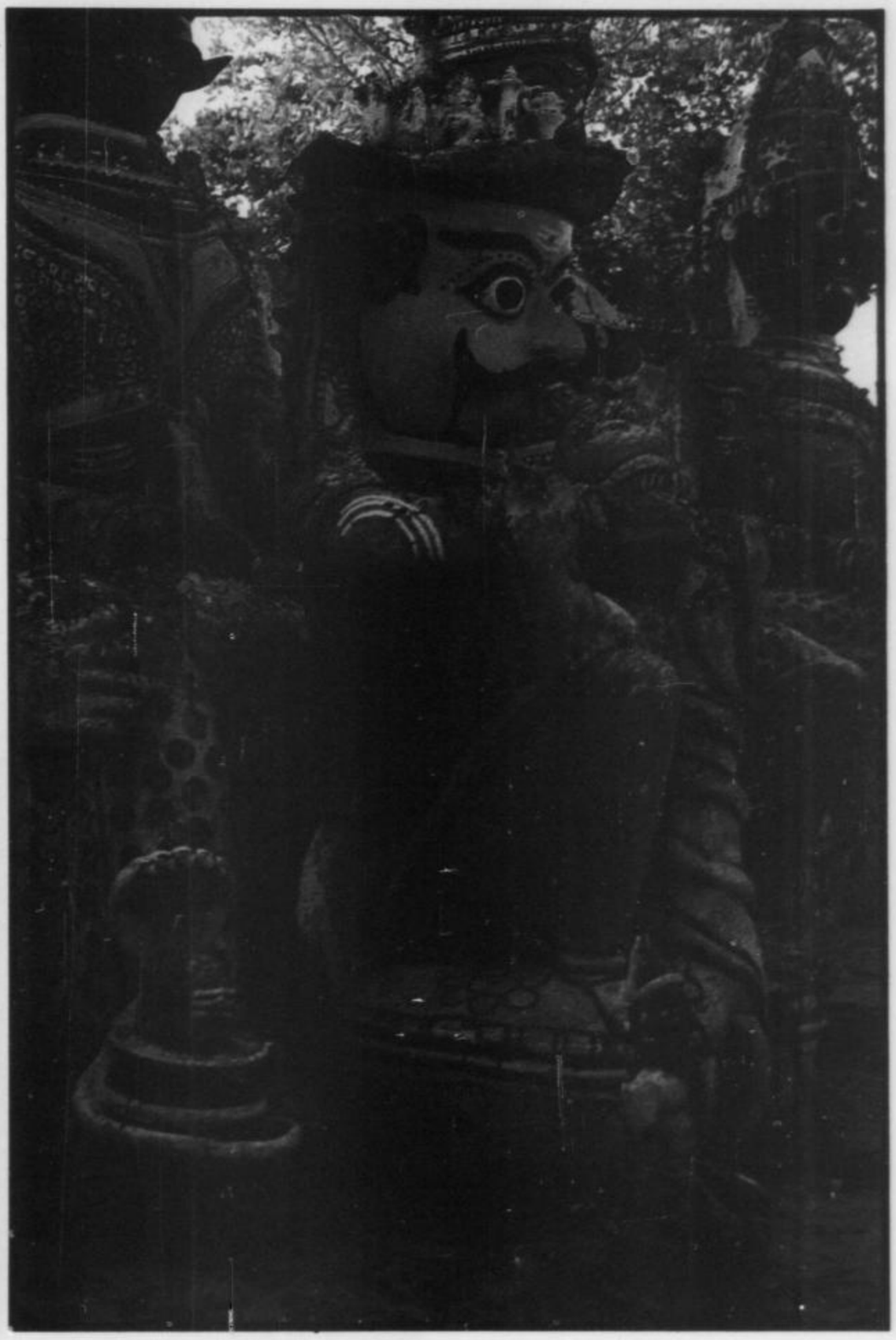
Photo © B. Mathias

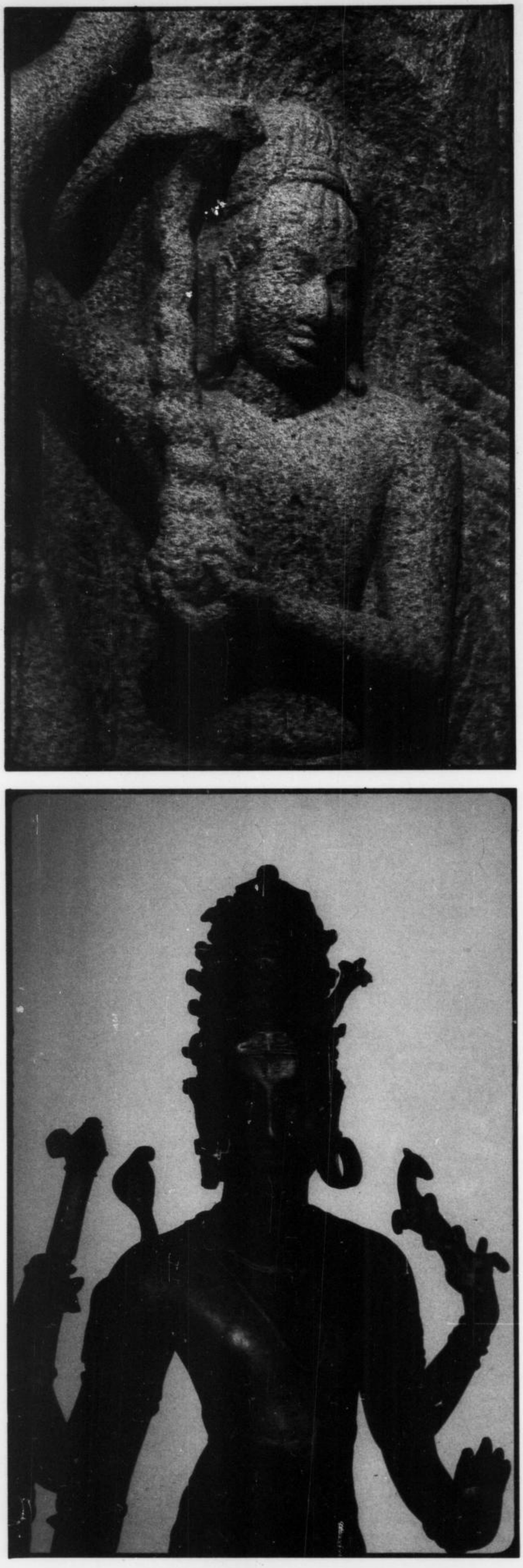
Top right: This early Chola bronze figure of Siva Natesa dancing on the head of a dwarf comes from Nallur in Tanjore district. It dates from about 900 AD and is unique in that it is the only bronze of a dancing Siva with eight arms. The Siva Natesa pictured here differs in form and pose from that of the better known Siva Nataraja (see photo page 25). Many forms of dancing Siva were made to emphasize different aspects of Siva's essential nature.

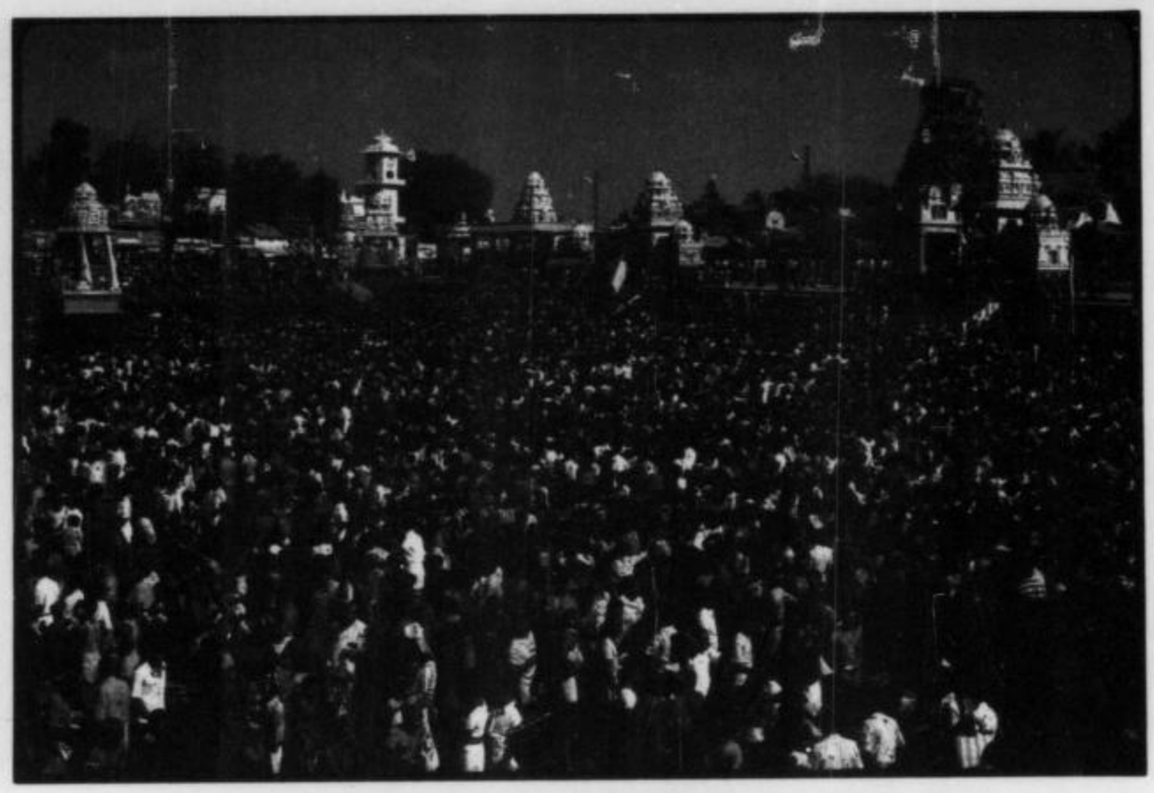
Bottom right: Dance formed an essential element in temple ritual. Dancing girls *(Devadasi)* attached to the temple performed a highly sophisticated ritual of dance and gestures codified by the sage Bharata Muni who lived in the 1st century BC. Today, temple dancing as an institution has disappeared, although one form of temple dance, the *Bharata Natyam,* has survived and has been taken up by girls of all groups and social levels (see also page 26).

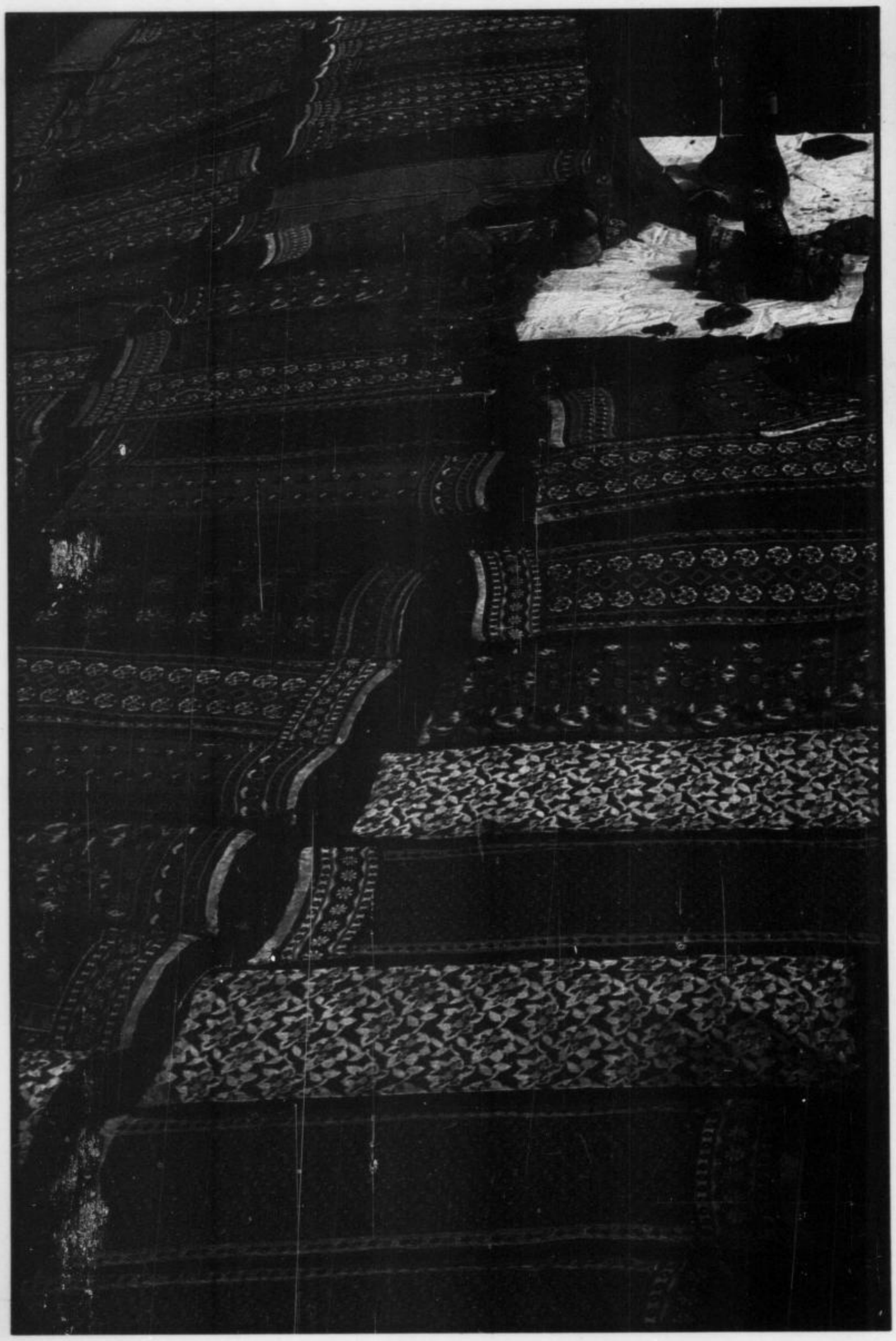
Photos © R. Nagaswamy, Madras











2.
Images in bronze

TAMIL bronze sculpture represents a distinctive contribution to world art. In early Sangam literature (see article page 32) there are allusions to metal images, and ancient hymns of Sivaite and Vishnavite devotees refer to the statues of deities being taken in procession at festivals; these processional images were traditionally made of copper.

Metal images were made by the lost-wax, or *cire perdue*, process and were solid cast in copper, silver or gold. Later,an alloy of five metals—copper, brass, zinc, gold and silver—was used. God is said to pervade the five basic elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether and his cosmic body is believed to be composed of these five elements. Each of the five metals used in the making of images is taken to represent one of the five elements and images made of them are known as *panca lona murthi*, or "five-metalled images".

From the initial sculpting of the figure in wax to the very last act of consecration, every stage in the process is accompanied by rituals and the recital of sacred hymns. The last sacred act performed by the artist is the "opening of the eyes" as the carving of the eyes is called. The right eye of the deity represents the sun, the left eye the moon and the mark on the forehead fire. The ritual fixing of the image to its pedestral is considered to be the final consecration.

Metal images are worshipped regularly, receive daily offerings and, on days of festival, are decorated, placed on chariots and taken out in procession, acting, as it were, as the representative of a temple's main stone statue. Almost all temples possess a number of metal images and altogether they must number several thousand.

The earliest metal objects found in Tamil Nadu are grave goods excavated at Adiccanallur in the Thirunelveli district. They consist of copper lamps and ornamental plates often with bases in the form of dogs and cocks. One tiny figure, thought to represent the "mother goddess", has also been found.

Of the few eighth-century bronzes that have come to light most are representations of Vishnu and are modest in size. One of the finest examples of bronze sculpture of the Pallava period, however, is a figure of Siva with his consort, now in the Madras Museum. A statue of Vishnu in his form as Trivikrama (the conqueror of the Three Worlds that constitute the Universe) and another Vishnu statue from Kodumudi are classic examples of eighth to ninth-century bronze art. The heights reached by Tamil artists of this ▸

Colour page 22

Top left: Women planting out rice in the district of Tiruccirappalli.

Photo © Marie-Louise Reiniche, Paris

Bottom left: Saris being dyed. The sari, the traditional outer garment for women of the Indian sub-continent, is a piece of brightly coloured or embroidered cloth, some five metres long (ceremonial saris can be up to eight metres long), which is worn wrapped around the body. One end of the sari can be draped over the head as a hood. Hindu women wear the sari over a midriff-length blouse and a petticoat.

Photo © S. Baskaran, Madras

Top right: Devotees taking a ritual bath in a sacred pool in the town of Kumbhakonam on the occasion of a great twelve-yearly festival.

Bottom right: In Tamil Nadu, dance dramas based on stories from the *Mahbharata,* one of the major epics of India, or on local legends are enacted exclusively by men. Known as *Terukkuthu* (street dance), they are especially popular in rural areas. They combine classic and folk elements and performances sometimes continue for several consecutive nights. Dialogue is interspersed with dance and song and the actors colour their faces and wear colourful costumes and elaborate headgear.

Photos © R. Nagaswamy, Madras

Photo ©R. Nagaswamy, Madras

Detail of a Chola bronze image of Lakshmana, the brother of the epic hero Rama. Dating from the mid-10th century it is still an object of worship at Paruthiyur in the Tanjore district.

Photo © R. Nagaswamy, Madras

The marriage of Siva and Parvati. This 9th-century bronze from Vadakkalathur is a superb example of the bronze sculpture of the late Pallava period (see article this page and detail on colour page 20).

▶period are exemplified by a superb bronze of Siva marrying Parvati. It portrays the bashful tenderness of a young girl standing at the side of her lover and the majesty and pride of the master conscious of the delicate sensitivity of his consort whose hand he holds. More than simply a representation of a divine union, it is also a vivid portrayal of human emotions.

Bronze art reached its zenith under the Chola emperors during the tenth and eleventh centuries and its artistic merit is now recognized the world over. Early Chola bronze art can be divided into three schools: the Aditya, the Sembiyan Mahadevi and the Raja Raja schools.

Aditya Chola (875 to 906) and his son Parantaka (906 to 955) built many temples famed for their beautiful sculptures and ornamentation. Among the many types of bronzes made under their patronage one in particular won the admiration not only of the artists of the succeeding generations but also of modern thinkers and artists. These are the Siva Nataraja, or figures of Siva as the master dancer. Both as an art form and as a symbol representing the highest philosophical thought of India they are unparalleled. Since that time images of Siva Nataraja have been a feature of every Siva temple.

Sembiyan Mahadevi was a Chola queen of great devotion and refined aesthetic taste. Widowed while still young, she devoted her life to visiting sacred sites, having temples rebuilt and bronzes made. She made generous donations to temples of gold and silver vessels and jewels to adorn their statues. Bronzes made to her command are notable for their slender grace and charm.

Raja Raja Chola (985 to 1014) had many bronzes made for the great temple at Tanjore. Raja Raja's personal attention to every aspect of temple life is attested to in inscriptions, many of which refer to the consecration of bronze statues which are often described in detail.

Many superlative examples of the bronzes of the Raja Raja school, remarkable for their majesty and dignity, are now preserved in the Tanjore Art Gallery. A few still remain in temples, the finest of these being the statue of Siva Nataraja in the great temple of Tanjore. The trend set by the Raja Raja school continued until the end of the eleventh century after which, although a great number of bronzes were made, there was a steady decline in quality.

■ **R. Nagaswamy**

REFLECTIONS ON SIVA NATARAJA

The great French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) was a highly perceptive admirer of Indian art. In an issue of the magazine Ars Asiatica *published in 1921 he made a series of succinct and penetrating comments on photos of statues of the god Siva preserved in the Madras Museum. Below, salient passages in which Rodin evokes the head and face of a bronze sculpture of Siva dancing at the centre of a circle of flames* (Siva Nataraja).

General impression of the Siva :

Fullness of life, the river of life, air, sun, overflowing sense of being. This is how the art of the Far East appears to us!...

The divinity of the human body was captured at that time, not because they were closer to the origins, for our forms have remained entirely the same; but the servitude of today thought it had achieved total emancipation; and we are out of orbit. The taste is lacking...

Photos Victor Goloubew © Government Museum, Madras

Bronze statues of *Siva Nataraja,* the Lord of the Dance, are an important expression of Hindu thought and philosophy and are to be found in separate, south-facing shrines at almost all Siva temples. They portray symbolically the *pancakrityas,* or five acts of the Supreme Being—creation, sustenance, destruction, the banishment of ignorance and the bestowal of grace. The four-armed Siva is depicted within a flaming aureole (see photo above and detail left). One hand holds a small, double-headed drum, symbolizing the initial vibration in space of cosmic creation, while another holds the fire that consumes all that is created. The palm of the third hand, facing the devotee in the *abhaya* pose assures him of freedom from fear. The hand of the fourth arm, swung across the body in the *gajahasta* pose, points to the raised left foot, the place of refuge from ignorance and delusion (which are symbolized by the dwarf demon trampled by the right foot) and the ultimate goal of the individual soul where all is bliss and where there is neither birth nor death. Siva is the greatest exponent of music and dance. He is said to dance in the vast expanse of the sky as well as in the pure mind of the devotee.

During long contemplation of the head of the Siva:

This swollen, out-thrust mouth, abundant in its sensual expressions...

The tenderness of mouth and eye are in harmony.

These lips like a lake of pleasure bordered by nostrils palpitating and noble.

The mouth undulates in damp delights, sinuous as a snake; the eyes closed, swollen, closed with a stitching of lashes.

The wings of the nose rise tenderly on a full surface.

The lips which form the words, which move when they escape. Such a delicious snake in movement!

The eyes which have only a corner in which to hide have the purity of line and the serenity of nestling stars.

The still fair weather of these eyes; the still outline; the still joy of this calm.

The chin is the stopping point on which the curves converge.

The expression is continued with an ending which dissolves into another. The movements of the mouth are lost in the cheeks.

The curve which comes from the ear echoes a small curve which pulls the mouth and, slightly, the wings of the nose; it is a circle which passes beneath the nose and the chin as far as the cheekbones.

The high cheeks which curve.

Still before the eloquent head of the Siva:

This eye stays in the same place with its companion; it is in a propitious shelter; it is voluptuous and luminous.

The closed eyes, the sweetness of time gone by.

These eyes purely drawn like a precious enamel.

The eyes in the casket of the eyelids; the arc of the brows; that of the sinuous lip.

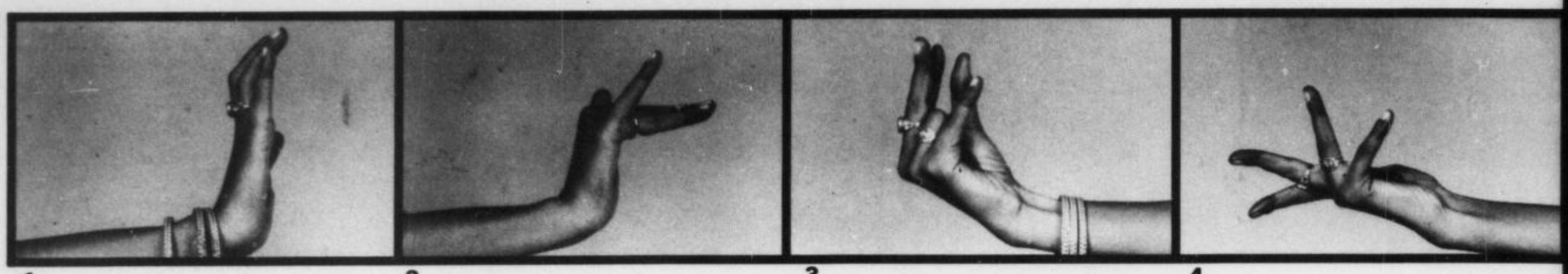
Mouth, a cavern of the sweetest thoughts, but a volcano for the furies.

The materiality of the soul that one can imprison in this bronze, captive for several centuries; desires for eternity on this mouth; the eyes which are going to see and talk.

For ever, life enters and leaves through the mouth, as the bees continually enter and leave; sweet perfumed respiration.

This pretty, lost profile has a profile, but the profile where the expression reaches completion, sinks, leaving the charm of the declining cheeks to join the attachments of the neck.

Auguste Rodin



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BHARATA NATYAM

An ancient art reborn

Bharata Natyam is the modern name for the classical dance-drama of Tamil Nadu in which a language of conventionalized hand gestures and body movements is used to help the dancers convey meaning and expression. Characters from the Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana,* are portrayed in this intricate and graceful art which combines drama, music, poetry, colour and rhythm.

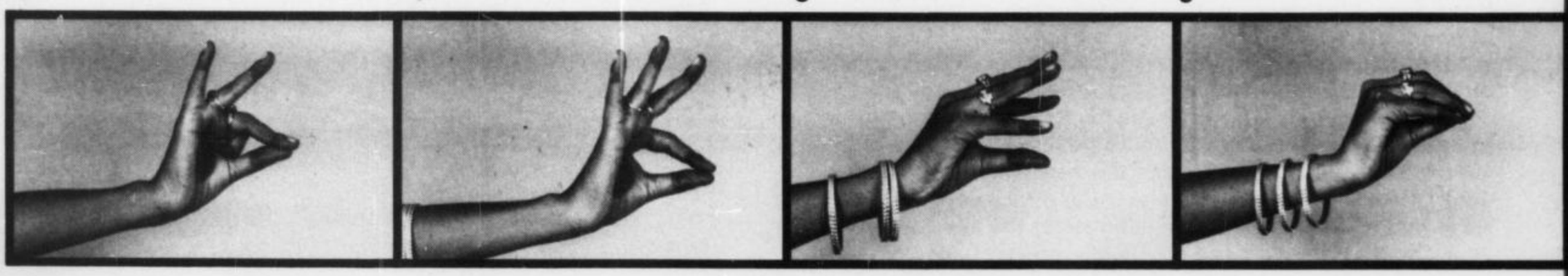
Bharata Natyam is performed according to techniques which are carefully laid down in the *Natya Sastra,* a remarkable Sanskrit treatise covering all aspects of dance and drama which was probably written around the beginning of the Christian era by the sage Bharata. For many centuries the dances were performed exclusively in the precincts of the great temples by female dancers known as *devadasis* (''servants of god'') who underwent years of training before they were ready to perform in public. Many sculptures carved on temple walls, some dating back to the tenth century AD, depict *karanas* (positions of hands and feet described in the *Natya Sastra)* and testify to the importance dance then held in religious life. It was through the temple dancers that Bharata Natyam (then known as *dasi attam,* the dance of the *devadasi)* survived to modern times. But then the *devadasi* system fell into decline and disrepute and it seemed that the dance tradition it had preserved for so long would disappear into oblivion.

In the last fifty years, however, as part of a new consciousness of ancient Indian cultural traditions Bharata Natyam has not only been saved from extinction but has experienced a remarkable revival and achieved international renown. Rukmini Devi is an outstanding figure in this revival. Born in 1904, in the 1930s she became the first woman from outside the *devadasi* tradition to learn Bharata Natyam. With other major artists such as the dancer Balasaraswathi she set out ''to bring the spirit of the temple to the stage'', in a movement in which scholars and creators sought to rediscover the pure forms of ancient classical dance by studying ancient texts and temple friezes and carvings and by consulting the survivors of the *devadasi* tradition.

In 1936 Rukmini Devi founded an academy in Madras, Kalakshetra (''Centre of Arts'') to train promising artists and teachers and since then students from many parts of the world have been trained under her guidance in Bharata Natyam and classical Carnatic music, as well as following courses in printing, weaving, stage and costume design. ''It is amazing to see how limitless an art Bharata Natyam is'', Rukmini Devi has written. ''For, if one can depict the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana* through Bharata Natyam, this means that one can express all human emotion and thought through it, for these epics and the other ancient stories portray every possible human experience.''

In Bharata Natyam the language of hand gestures *(hastas)* is so vast that the dancer can express practically anything from abstract concepts to objects and actions. One gesture may mean many different, unrelated things. On this page: (1) serpent's head; (2) head of a wild animal; (3) recipient or bud of a flower; (4) open lotus; (5) the figure 4; (6) bee; (7) to hold; a bird; (8) fear; the figure 5; (9) to eat; the navel; (10) a bird.

Opposite page: Yamin Krishnamurti, a leading exponent of Bharata Natyam who was trained at Kalakshetra, the international centre for dance and music established at Madras by Rukmini Devi.



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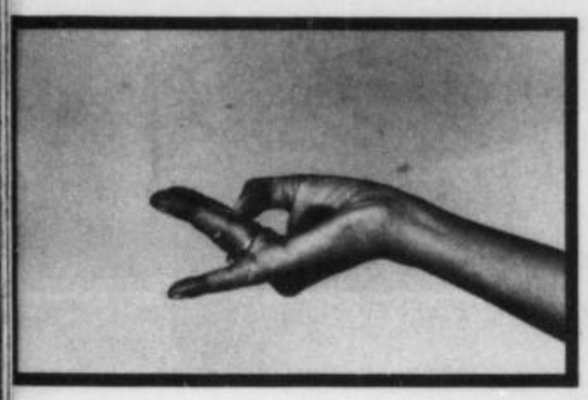

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Rukmini Devi today.

10

Photos © Sylvie Carnot, Paris

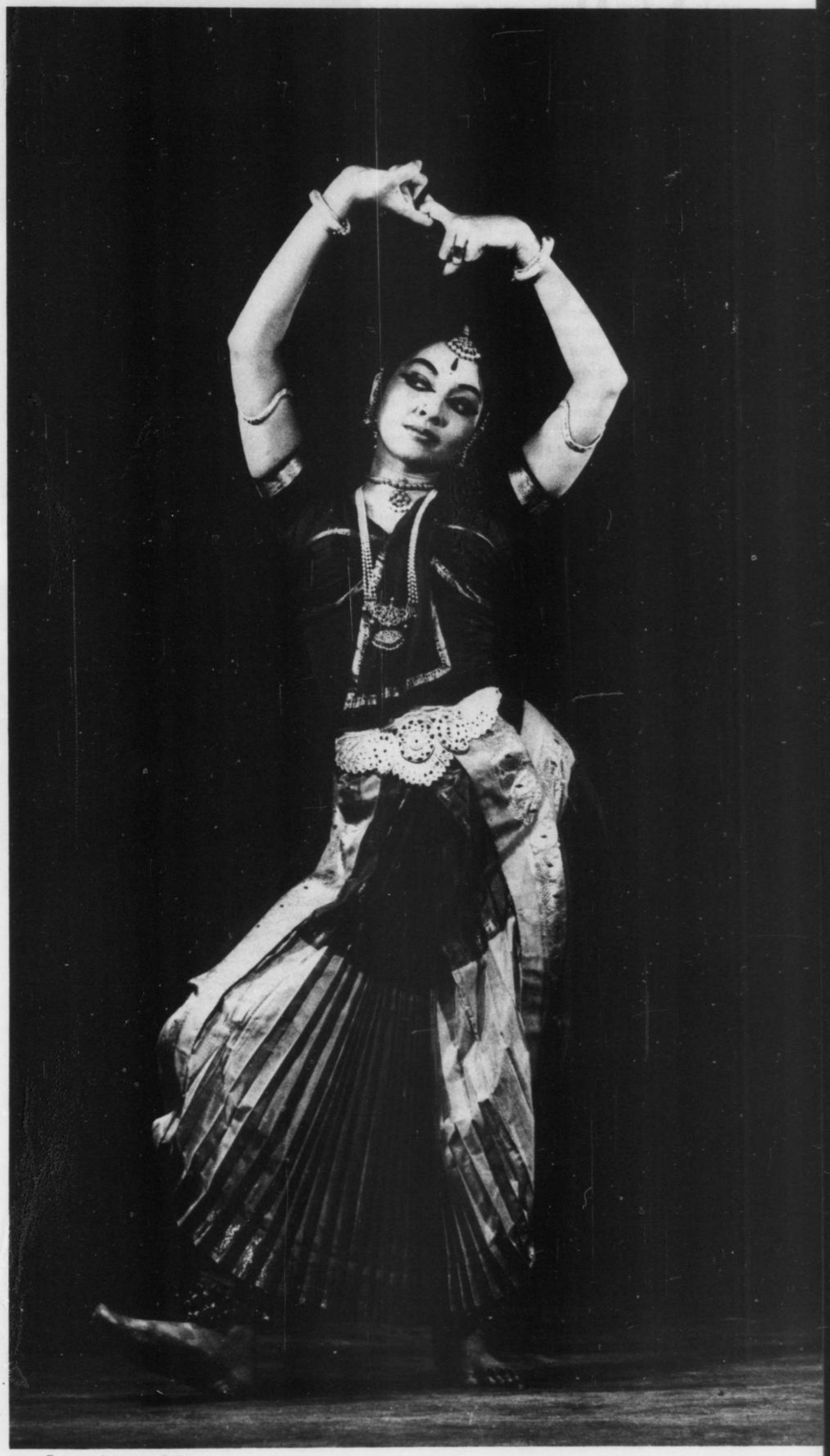


Photo © Claude Sauvageot, Paris

Village gods and heroes

This "Mother Goddess", some 3.5 metres in height and dating from about 500 BC, was discovered recently near a group of megalithic dolmens. She is thought to be one of the forerunners of the Srivatsa, or symbols of the goddess of wealth, which began to appear in the 8th century AD. Similar mother goddess fertility figures have been found in many parts of the world.

THE POTTER'S ART

Potters enjoy a special status in Tamil Nadu. Unlike potters in other parts of India they wear the "sacred thread" of the "twice-born" (see caption page 13), which elsewhere is reserved for higher castes, and they frequently act as unofficial guardians of the smaller village temples. This hereditary task enhances their standing in the community and gives them the material advantage of a share in the offerings made to the gods of meat, fruit and money. Although their main activity is the making of pots and similar domestic utensils, Tamil potters are famed for making the largest terra-cotta statues in the world. Figures of horses, which can be as much as seven metres in height, are much in demand as offerings, especially to the god Ayanar. They are believed to serve as chargers for his warriors when they make their nocturnal patrols to keep demons away from the villages. Terra-cotta images of popular deities (wise men or heroes) are also sometimes of monumental size, although in recent years these have tended to be made of brick and cement. Traditional methods are still used, however, for small or medium-sized *ex voto* objects or statues offered to a deity—a statue of a child in thanks for its birth or recovery from sickness; models of feet, hands or other limbs or parts of the body, for recovery from injury or illness; even of animals (usually cows and more rarely dogs and cats). The presentation of a statue to a temple often involves the performance of quite complicated rites, but, even for the most humble votive offering, the critical moment is the placing in position by the potter of the eyes, the final, essential, life-giving gesture before installation in the temple.

ALTHOUGH it is the monumental architecture of India's classical temples which usually overwhelms the visitor, it is the country's folk temples, several times greater in number, that reflect the living faith of the people.

India's village temples owe their origin to a belief in the various manifestations—malevolent and benevolent—of the spirit of nature, and to a conviction that God dwells in all animate and inanimate phenomena—trees, rivers, mountains, water-tanks, the sea, lightning and the wind.

They are also connected to the fertility cult so widely prevalent throughout the ancient world. Faith in the Mother Goddess led to the personification of every village settlement in a *grama devata,* a village Goddess who protects the villagers, decides their fate and guides them like a fond mother.

Another concept that has made an important contribution to the development of village Gods is the worship of heroes who laid down their lives for the sake of their country or community. These heroes were commemorated and worshipped by the erection of Hero Stones or Memorial Stones, thousands of which are found in Tamil Nadu and other parts of India.

The erection of Hero Stones and the adoration of the dead hero as the saviour spirit of the community may be considered as an extension of the prehistoric cult of erecting megalithic tombs. The Hero-Stones are in the form of a dolmen with three upright slabs erected in the form of a small chamber and topped by a cap-stone. The figure of the hero is carved on the back slab, facing the front. The representation of the hero on the slab takes various forms. The simplest shows him in the act of fighting with a spear, a sword, or bow and arrow.

In a number of cases the event relating to the death of the hero, the period and the people who erected the stone are recorded in the local language. In Tamil Nadu over 600 inscribed memorials dating from the fourth century A.D. almost until the present day have recently been found.

It is necessary to know something about Hero Stones in order to understand the social background of the village temples. Often the Stones stand beneath shady trees in simple surroundings. Long swords, spears, or tridents are placed in front of them, as well as terra-cotta horses painted in folk style. It was believed that the spirit of a hero resided forever in each monument, bestowing benefactions on the community. The spirit was dreaded, loved, adored and worshipped and was considered the saviour of the community.

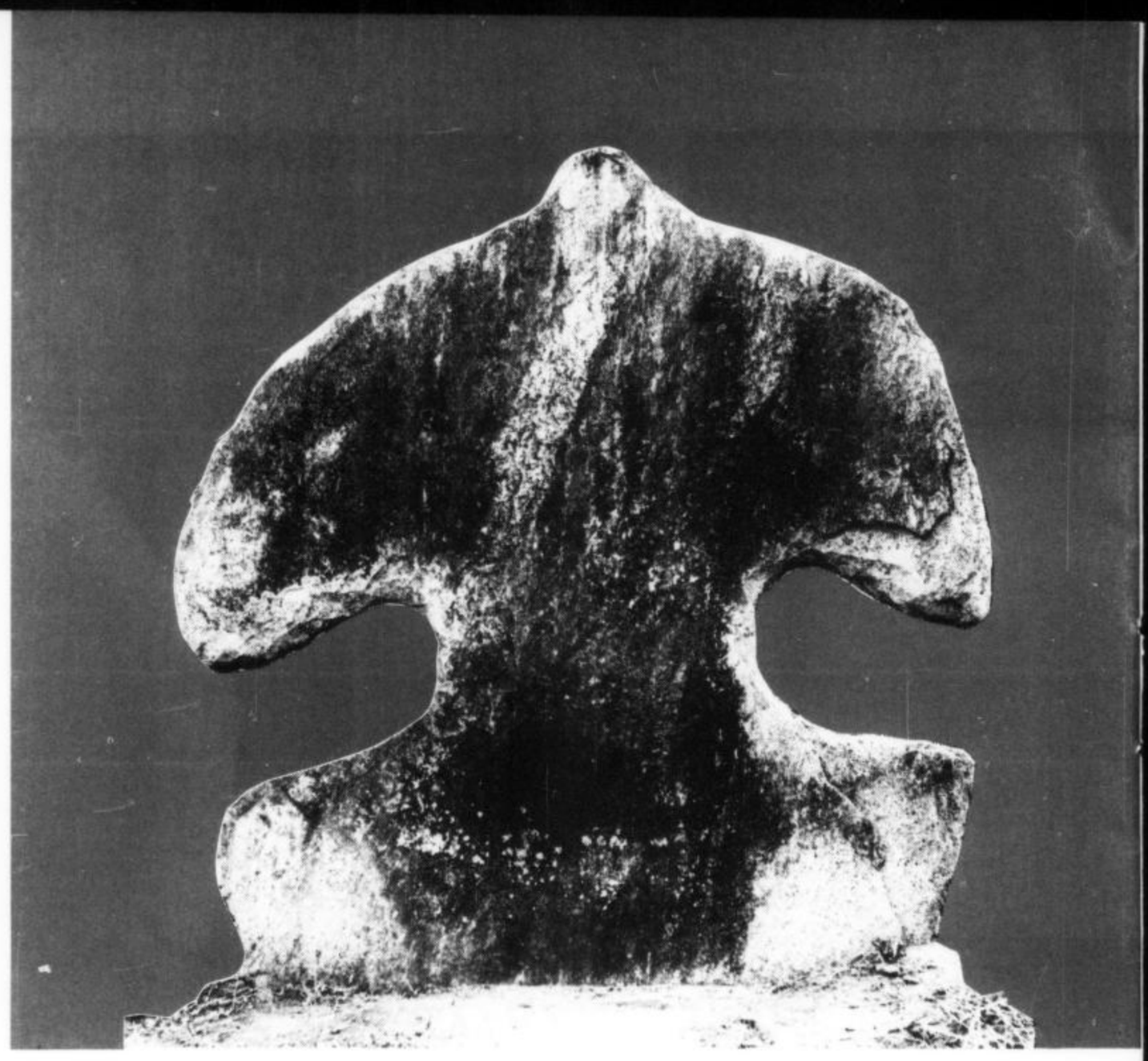
Some regional as opposed to village deities found in Tamil Nadu arose from the cult of a hero's death. One of them, Maduraiviran, who is worshipped in central Tamil Nadu, was a seventeenth-century hero who defended the country valiantly and was later put to death by its ruler after a love affair. The romantic element and the hero's tragic end at the hands of the very ruler he had fought for created such an aura around him that soon his spirit was recognized as a most powerful divinity and his temple was found in every village. The most important feature of his temple is the huge figure of a horse placed either in front of him or carrying him. People believe that his spirit ascends the horse after dusk, and goes around the village protecting the people at night.

Another factor in the development of village temples was the veneration of women who died in heroic circumstances. One ▶

Photo © State Department of Archaeology, Tamil Nadu

Photos © Jean-Baptiste Faivre, Paris

Village gods and heroes



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Another factor in the development of village temples was the veneration of women who died in heroic circumstances. One ▶

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▶ such death that was popular was that of the chaste wife who committed *sati*, that is, she died voluntarily on her husband's funeral pyre. Recorded evidence for such customs is available from the beginning of the Christian era. The spirits of women who die in such circumstances are said to be very powerful, protecting the community and also severely punishing wrong-doers. Their figures are carved on stones, enshrined and adored as *Masati*.

In all these instances of the worship of the dead as the village gods, the offering consists of all types of food and other things that had pleased the dead person while he was alive. Offerings of animal flesh and liquor are quite common modes of worship. Animal sacrifice is often misundersood and blown up out of proportion. It arises out of the eating habits of the people. The simple concept behind this offering is that whatever one eats is first ceremoniously offered to the deity. The cock, chicken and goat are offered in the presence of the deity, cooked and then consumed by the worshipper. There are some temples where even specially prepared cigars are offered.

Festivals are conducted annually for the village gods or are specially arranged either to ward off natural calamities, epidemics or threats to the community which are of human origin. They are celebrated with great pomp and show. The presence of the deity is felt so powerfully that to utter a lie in its presence, it is believed, brings calamity to the teller. Many disputes, such as proof of adultery, repudiation of loans received and other such matters are settled even to this day in the village temple. In many villages in the interior there is no need for civil or criminal courts to decide the nature of punishments. The temple of the village god, the impersonal spirit that permeates and rules the society is sufficient to take care of evil-doers.

The village deity wards off all diseases. If a person is affected in any part of his body, or the whole, he prays to the deity for a cure and offers a replica of the afflicted member made of terra-cotta, wood or metal. Or a full terra-cotta figurine representing a human form is made and placed with devotion in front of the deity. For happy child birth, a terra-cotta figure of a child in a cradle is offered. To ward off cattle diseases, large or small clay figures are likewise placed in the temple. Several hundred such terra-cotta figurines can be seen in front of many village temples. And on all such occasions the folk artist (mainly the village potter) is honoured with new cloth, garlands of flowers, special food and money. In fact the cult of the village god was mainly responsible for sustaining and fostering folk arts.

The cult of the village gods has also been a fount of inspiration for folk music and dance. Several hundred folk ballads and songs are connected with the adoration of village heroes, and during festivals they are sung by village minstrels for hours—sometimes throughout the night. So spirited are these folk songs that even people who are in their houses rush towards the sound of the music in a trance and sometimes thousands of people can be seen on these occasions, marching, singing and dancing.

This expression of devotion often takes the form of walking barefoot over fire, piercing one's body with decorated needles or lances, or carrying firepots in one's arms. Both men and women take part in such devotions.

The conservatism of the village folk is revealed in their forms of dress, ornamentation and mode of singing, which can be traced back several centuries. For example, in the Alagar festival held in Madurai during March and April, several thousand villagers dress themselves in colourful costumes, and wear dresses and ornaments similar to those that can be seen in sixteenth-century paintings and sculptures. Another festival in Farur attracts several thousand men, who dress as women and move through the streets singing and dancing. In another interesting festival, held in a suburb of Madras, several men and women clad in neem leaves circumambulate the temple of the village goddess several times. The fact that such customs—referred to in literature at the beginning of the Christian era—have survived to this day, very near the capital of the State, shows the powerful hold these faiths have over the people.

Sometimes such folk beliefs and customs are superimposed on the classical temple. There is a celebrated temple at Alagar Koil near Madurai where worship is performed by orthodox Vishnavite Brahmins according to classical rites. In the entrance tower of the temple is the figure of a folk god, "Karuppan of the steps". The Karuppan, the spirit of the hero who guarded the temple and lost his life when defending it from robbers, is held in greater veneration by the village people than the main classical deity, Vishnu. When the annual festival for Vishnu is celebrated, several million people assemble to adore both Vishnu and the Karappan. Such a superimposition of folk customs, music and dance on classical temples can be observed in many places and seems, at least for the casual spectator, to abolish the dividing line between the folk temple and the classical temple.

However, there is one essential difference between the classical temple and the folk temple. In the former there is a trained family of worshippers, the priests, who perform the daily acts of worship and the rites of periodical festivals as prescribed. In other words, there is an intermediary between the devotee and the divine. The priest's presence is accepted as a necessity; he can perform acts of worship while the rest of the community pursues its daily tasks and goes to the temple only when in need.

In the village temples communication between the devotee and the deity is direct and so the feeling of attachment is more intimate. The divine spirit is always present in the village temple and anyone can go and worship directly. Whatever the offering, or whatever the form in which it is made, the village god is pleased. This is why the village temples remain so popular.

■ **R. Nagaswamy**

Erected in 625 AD during the reign of the Pallava ruler Mahendra I, this hero stone immortalizes a hero who fell, his faithful dog at his side, defending his cow-shed against robbers. The details of this incident and the name of the hero and the dog are inscribed at the top of the stone in ancient Tamil script.

Photo © State Department of Archaeology, Tamil Nadu

Hindu harvest festival

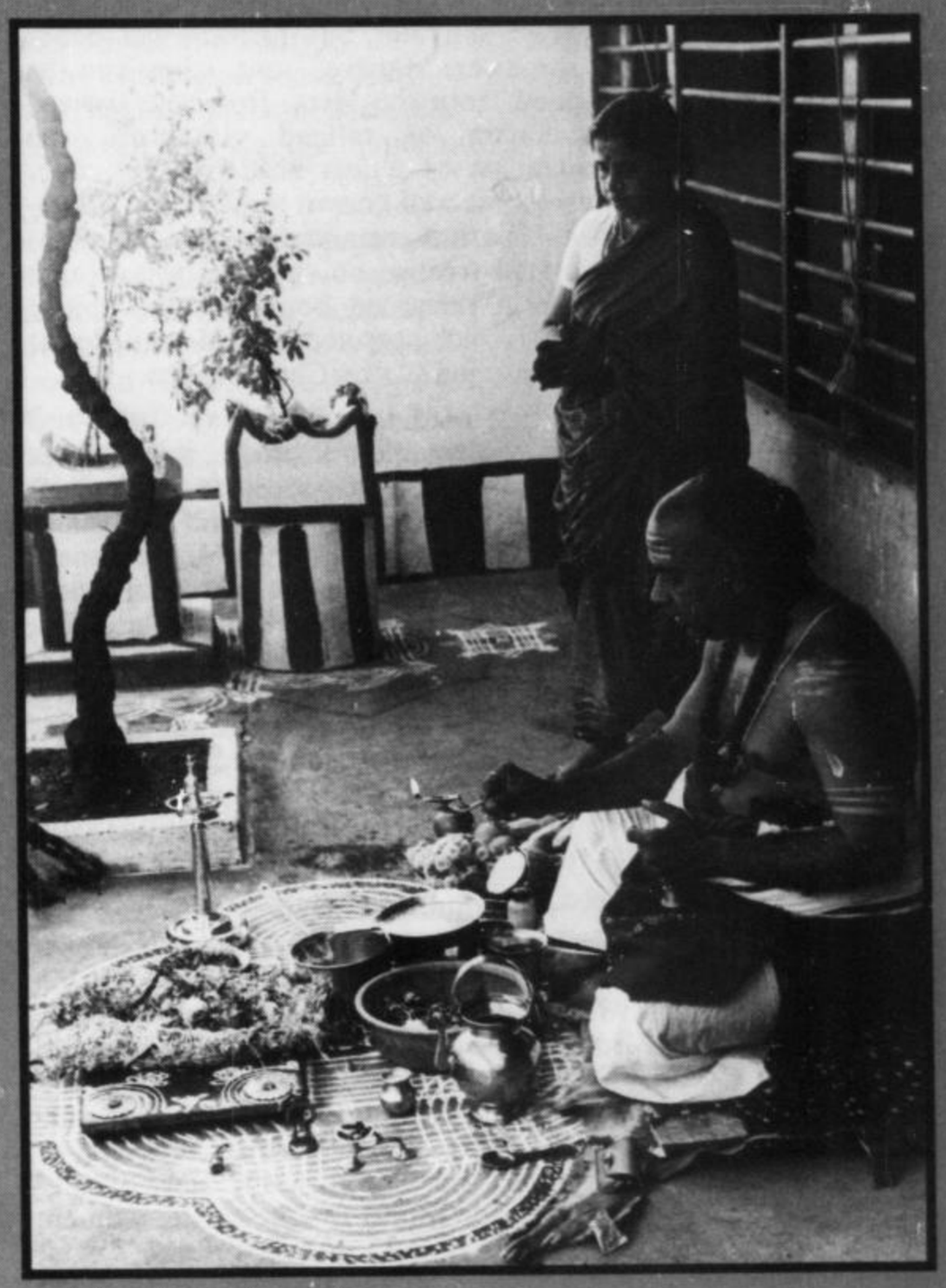
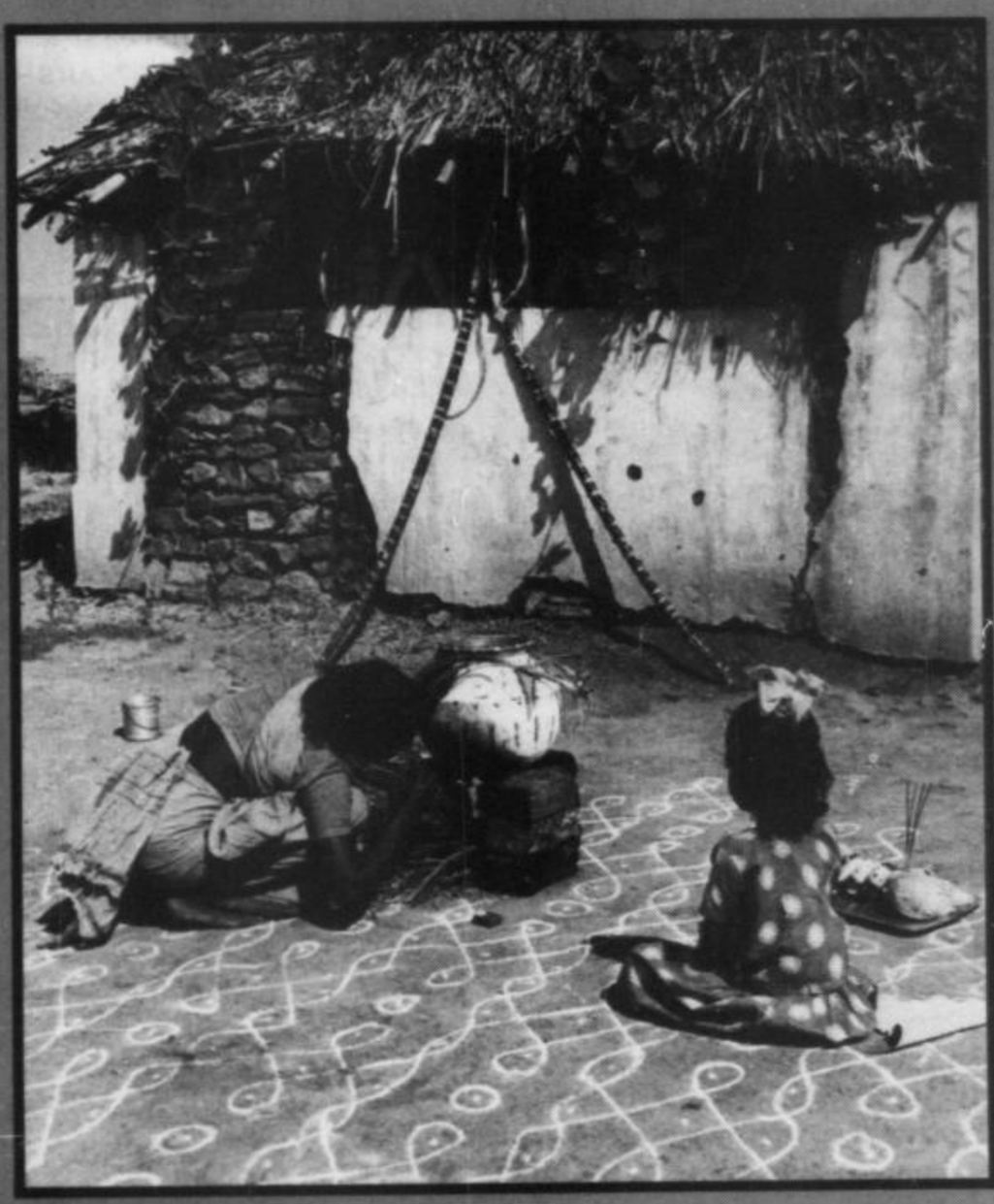


Photo © Jean-Baptiste Faivre, Paris

Photos on this page show how Tamils in city and countryside celebrate *Pongal*, one of the most important popular Hindu festivals of the year. This four-day festival of thanksgiving to nature takes its name from the Tamil word meaning "to boil" and is held in the month of *Thai* (January-February) during the season when rice and other cereals, sugar-cane, and turmeric (an essential ingredient in Tamil cooking) are harvested. On the first day of Pongal, the *puja* or act of ceremonial worship is performed when rice is boiled in milk outdoors in an earthenware pot and is then symbolically offered to the sun-god along with other oblations. Above, wearing traditional dress and markings, husband and wife of a city brahmin family dispose of elegant ritual utensils specially used for the *puja*. In the village, right, where the ceremony is carried out more simply but with the same devotion, the little girl is wearing a new dress and hair-ribbon to mark the festive mood. In accordance with the appointed ritual a turmeric plant has been tied around the pot in which the rice will be boiled. The offerings include the two sticks of sugar-cane in background and coconut and bananas in the dish. A common feature of the *puja*, in addition to the offerings, is the *kolam*, the auspicious design which is traditionally traced in white lime powder before the house in the early morning after bathing. Above right, a highly elaborate *kolam* with mazy floral and animal motifs being drawn for Pongal in a Pondicherry street. On subsequent days of Pongal cows and bulls are worshipped. Their horns are painted, they are decorated with flowers, garlanded with bells, and offered the cooked Pongal rice.



Photos © John K. Isaac

POETRY IN A LANDSCAPE
The world of Sangam

by François Gros

Photo © R. Nagaswamy, Madras

An early 10th-century bronze of the poet-saint Manikkavasaghar, author of the great collection of devotional hymns known as the Tiruvasagham. His extended left hand holds palm leaves, representing his hymns, while his right hand is in the *vyakhyana* position, representing the teaching of the supreme faith.

THE magical word *Sangam* conjures up the golden age of Tamil literature, that lost paradise of Dravidian culture. It calls to mind the myth of the three successive literary academies (the word "sangam" means "academy") of a fabulous era. The first and second academies were swallowed up in deluges comparable to the end of the world; only the third was rescued from oblivion.

This third Sangam corresponds to historical reality. Medieval commentators, followed in turn by nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars, have preserved the essence of this unique series of anthologies, written in the oldest of all the modern languages of India, which most likely date back to the first centuries of the Christian era. The Sangam is unquestionably one of the high points in world literature.

Little is known of the more than 450 authors, except that they came from all classes of society, the sole criterion by which they were judged being the recognition of their talent by their peers. These court poets sang the exploits of princes and warriors or the sorrows of a nation at war. Kings honoured them and they felt a keen sense of their own dignity. On one occasion, the bard Mucikkiranar fell asleep in the palace near the place reserved for the royal drum, a sacrilege punishable by death. Discovering him in this invidious situation, the king, rather than taking harsh measures against him, picked up a fan and cooled his sleep, thus rendering homage to his genius.

In this exemplary anecdote the magical origins and totemic aspects of royalty are seen in their relation to the sacred function of the poet and the cathartic role of the drummers (Pariahs). It should be added that contemporary Tamil humour declares Mucikkiranar to have been the first Indian civil servant to fall asleep on the job! Yet if today's poets are ironical, those of the Sangam were the ambassadors of kings on conciliatory missions (like Auvaiyar) and tutors to the royal heirs (like Kapilar). Their praise had to be merited and could not be bought; their contempt or curse was degrading, for they were men who exchanged gifts with kings.

Among themselves, Tamil poets were far more than a brotherhood of starving bards who exchanged addresses of generous patrons. Rather they formed a sort of academy, as indicated by the word "Sangam". The legend of the Sangams was to be written later, but the historical reality is somewhat elusive, save what can be gleaned from the texts, from the stylized mannerism of refined classicism, the academism of a lost academy. Its code, however, is well known to us. The *Tolkappiyam,* both a grammar and a richly commentated treatise on rhetoric, serves as a linguistic reference book for this entire period, which spanned several centuries at the beginning of the Christian era.

At first reading, this poetry—brief and varied, violent and outspoken, and at times excessively romantic—seems to speak to all mankind in the language of the senses and the passions. The wisdom it preaches is a very humanistic, hedonistic stoicism, with, quite exceptionally for India, very few religious references. Yet these poems, presented in strictly ordered anthologies, have an inner discipline; words and images are never arbitrarily employed. A system of conventions and figures of speech imbues even the least significant of notions with underlying meanings and harmonies.

The anthologies lend themselves admirably to modern linguistic analysis, for they constitute a metalanguage within which the universe is perfectly structured. Some poems are concerned with the world of the senses, with all that is tangible and external *(puram),* dealing with civic or wartime exploits—the seizure or recovery of cattle, preparations for war (a place of safety had to be found for the cattle, women, children, the elderly and the priests), sieges, battles, triumph and disarray, victory and defeat. Others speak of the feelings and more abstract relationships of the heart, the anonymous and the internal *(agam).*

Every situation is described using themes in which the time, the place and the floral symbols of each episode are codified. The inner universe is divided into five geographical landscapes—mountains, forest, cropland, seashore and wasteland—used as symbols to imply a socio-economic order, occupations and behaviour patterns which, in turn, are symbolized by specific flora and fauna. Details of secondary aspects are just as rigidly codified—the seasons, the hour, a god, musical instruments and, above all, the sentimental connotations of each landscape: lovers' meetings, patient waiting, lovers' quarrels, separation, and the anxiously awaited return.

The mountain is the scene of the lovers' union at midnight. It is the cold, dewy season. The forest is rich with lakes, waterfalls, teak, bamboo and sandalwood. In this region millet grows and wild bees are a source of honey.

Love in this setting is exemplified by Murugan, that most Tamil of gods, and one of his wives, Valli, the daughter of mountaineers. He wears the sparkling red *kantal* flower and rides a peacock, the bird of the mountains. The name of the region, *kurinci,* is also the name of a famous flower from the lofty hills of Tamil country. In this same

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FRANÇOIS GROS *is director of studies at the* Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes *and director of the* Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, *Paris. A specialist in Dravidian history and literature, he was awarded the Prix Saintour in 1969 for his translation into French of* Paripatal, *an anthology of ancient Sangam texts. The editors of the* Unesco Courier *wish to acknowledge with gratitude the help and advice given by Mr. Gros in the preparation of this issue.*

region grows the strobilanth, a shrub whose brilliant white flowers blossom for only a few days once every ten or twelve years, blanketing the slopes in radiant whiteness under the sun. This event of jubilation and purity symbolizes the frenzy of a sudden love shared, in concert with the unleashed forces of nature: the amorous dance of peacocks, their echoing cries, the splash of waterfalls, the roar of savage beasts.

The lovers hold each other tighter still and forget the dangers of the mountain path. This region is dearest to the hearts of the Tamil people and, according to legend, the great poet Kapilar wrote the *Song of Kurinci* as an example for an Aryan king of a typical Tamil love poem.

The theme of wasteland and separation occupies half of one of the most famous anthologies, the theme of the mountain being only secondary. The theme of the forest and of shepherds at play, the image of confident waiting for the loved one, produced an original offshoot; for this is the region of Vishnu, and the love theme it represents symbolizes the devotee waiting in the hope that Vishnu, as Krishna, will eventually come and fill his soul, thus experiencing the joys of expectation.

The plains were the scene of triangular love plots in which the hero's visits to the courtesan oblige the heroine to counter with a mixed show of coquetry and moodiness, tactics whose limits are described in the *Kural* ("Sulking is like flavouring with salt; a little suffices, but it is easy to go too far."). Sangam poets offer countless examples of this:

The man of the village by the ponds
where the carp seize the ripe fruit of the
mango trees that line the fields.

In our land he is high and mighty; but in
theirs...

When arms and legs are raised, he raises
his
Like a puppet, a reflection in a mirror,

He does all he is asked, for the mother of
his son.

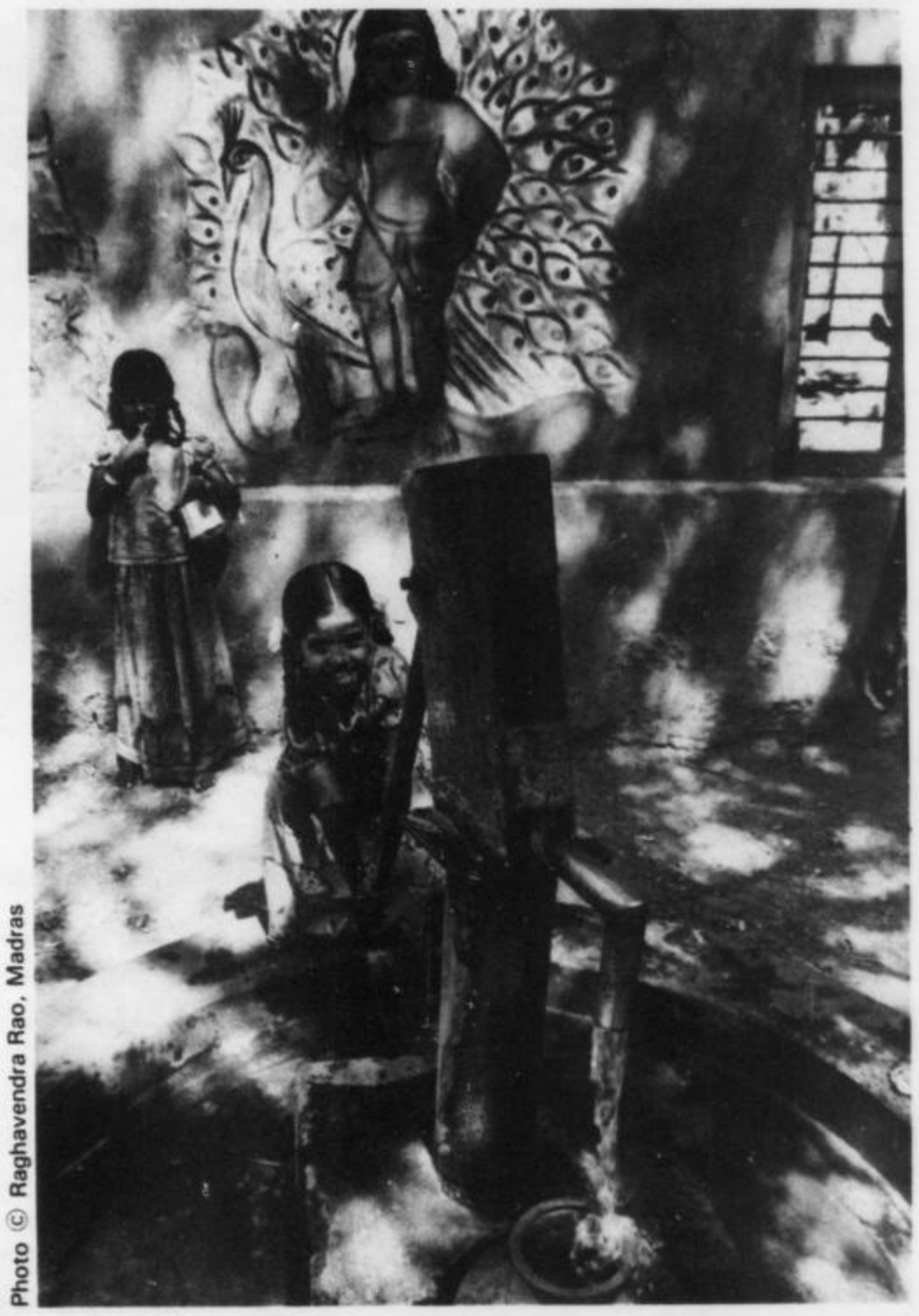
The courtesan, jealous of the wife, is speaking here. The landscape is defined by the designation of the hero (a fellow from the village), the mention of a creature (the carp), the tree (the mango), the water-filled scenery (the pond), the season (that of ripened mangoes and sultry heat, a secondary characteristic and sign of separation). The situation implies that the courtesan wishes to be heard by the heroine's confidante. Through the image of the opening lines she indicates that the hero has fallen freely for her wiles and that to win him she did not have to infringe upon his home ground; he is a hero of little substance, it would seem, in a situation dominated by women.

Although interpretation and the deciphering of the conventions of these texts can at times seem tiresome, the last landscape, the seashore, affords many examples of the compelling charm of Sangam poetry and the extraordinary freshness of its realism. From behind the conventional symbolization of waiting there emerges a picture of the life of the fisherfolk; the nets and boats drawn up on the beach, scuttling crabs and cart wheels bogged down in the sand, the odour of drying fish, cut into thick slices, which attracts the birds, beautiful village girls peering through the pandanus hedges, and the wind blowing through the cracks in the roughly constructed straw huts at night.

We must allow the texts to speak to us. The more the theoretical account highlights the unreality of the conventions used, the more each verse bristles with realistic images—a marvellous juxtaposition of words and subtle manipulation of rhetoric in which a twofold technique of suggestion *(iraicci)* and complex metaphor *(ullurai uvamam)* evokes a situation, and thus a mood, by describing a natural phenomenon, whilst the description alone suffices to imply the most explicit of sentimental relationships.

Careful use of rhetoric and its underlying themes and conventions make for great economy in descriptive writing. In contrast to the weightiness of the theoretical interpretation, the poems reveal a subtle freedom of movement in the dense matrix of allusions and in the art of bending the conventions by mixing the themes to test the shrewdness of the cultivated reader. Sangam poetry has often been considered the crowning achievement of a long oral tradition; however, the works that have survived to this day are among the most magnificent and most living examples of written poetry. ■ **François Gros**

Below, the central figure of this sculpture at the great temple of Tanjore, built by the Chola emperor Raja Raja I around 1000 AD, is the god Murugan seated on his mount, the peacock. The chief deity of the ancient Tamils, Murugan later became identified with Skanda, the northern Indian god of war and first-born son of Siva, and still has a large following in southern India under the name of Subrahmanya. Right, modern street mural depicting Murugan.



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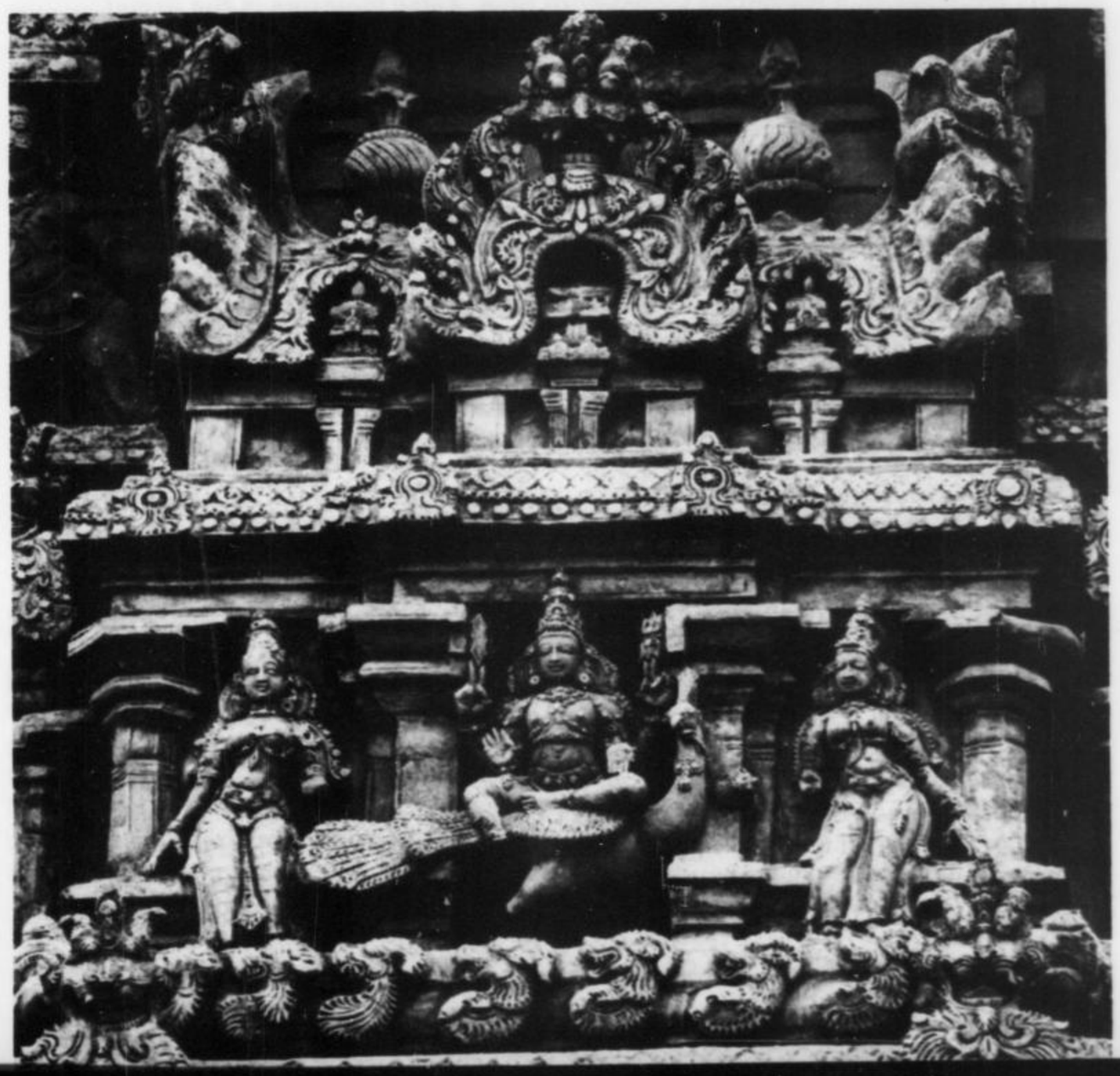


New writing in Tamil

by S. Ramakrishnan

THE late 1960s were marked by an upsurge in Tamil creative writing. The preoccupation with ancient Tamil culture had subsided, Tamil had been made the language of school and higher education and world Tamil conferences were making the Tamil language internationally known. The new poetry movement, which had started in the early 1930s, was still finding its feet, fostered mainly by small, short-lived magazines reaching a reading public of not more than one or two thousand.

Against this background Tamil writers turned for encouragement and support to two small-circulation but influential magazines, C.S. Chellappa's *Ezhuthu* (founded in 1959) and Ka Na Subramaniyam's *Ilakkiya Vattam* (founded in 1964). These two magazines, and the writers who contributed to them, took as their model *Manikkodi,* a magazine founded in the mid-1930s, in which the first attempt had been made to base literature on the realities of life.

The founders of *Manikkodi* were visionaries. They realized the need to provide an alternative to the new popular magazines which were beginning to make their influence felt. Although they were nationalists committed to liberating the country from foreign rule, they were also alive to the need to bring Tamil consciousness into contact with the mainstream of international culture. They themselves had benefited from English education and through it from exposure to world culture.

In *Manikkodi* there arose a major voice, that of Pudumaipittan, who still remains a main source of the contemporary literary tradition. Pudumaipittan held that writers had purposes other than that of using literature simply as a vehicle for the propagation of certain ideologies. He declared that his stories were not intended to be a means of educating the world and that art could not be confined within a philosophy of the sustenance of life. At a time when a group of writers, such as Girija Devi, Tamamirthammal and Va Ra, were obsessed with the evils of the caste system and the need to cut across caste barriers, particularly as far as marriage was concerned, Pudumaipittan had the courage to point out in his writings the problems that could arise in intercaste marriages as a result of the partners' differing cultural backgrounds.

Almost all the progressive writers of today who subscribe to the Marxist ideology trace their lineage back to Pudumaipittan. Among the writers of the post-independence generation T.M.C. Reghunathan was one of the first to attract wide attention with his *Panjum Pasiyum* (1953), a novel depicting the capitalist/worker relationship. He was followed by D. Jayakanthan, a more prolific writer whose earlier stories and novels espoused the cause of the underdog.

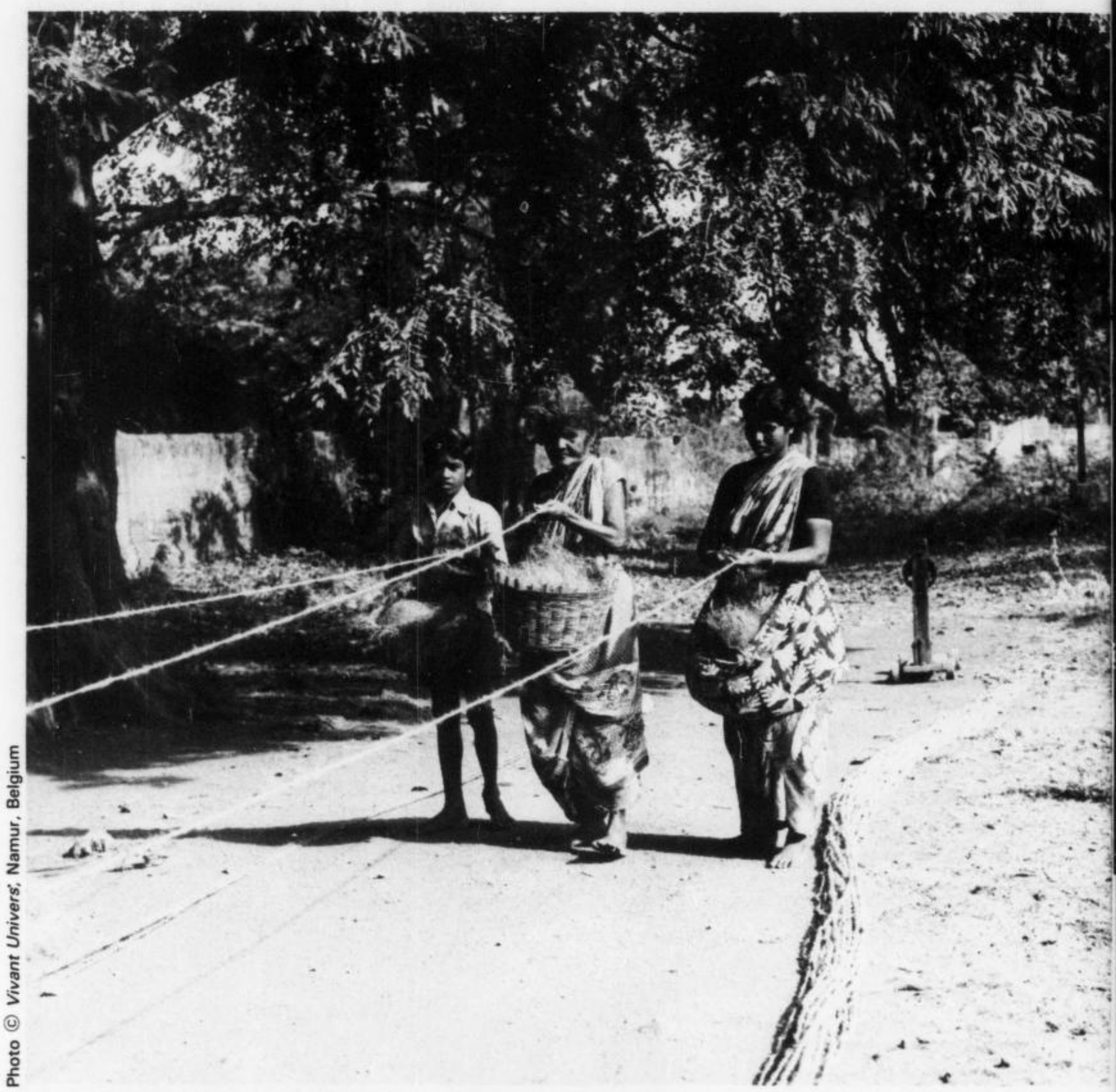


Photo © *Vivant Univers*, Namur, Belgium

THE THREAD AND THE BOOK. Venerated as Mother Tamil and Goddess Tamil, the Tamil language is traditionally regarded as the creation of the god Murugan and its grammar as a revelation by the Lord Siva. Tamil literature is the oldest in India apart from that written in classical Sanskrit. In the Tamil language the same word *nul* is used to denote both a thread and a finished work, symbolized by three generations of villagers, above, twisting coconut fibres into cord.

Jayakanthan wrote about a wide range of issues: the urban middle-class, the underprivileged urban slum-dweller, women in revolt, the notions of art, the confrontation between the traditional and the modern way of life and the changes this necessitated, the notions of brahminhood, justice, aspects of sexuality, and so on. His vociferousness was infectious and he became a model for many writers.

The younger generation of leftist writers (including Poomani, Pa Jayaprakasam and Rajendra Cholan) drew their inspiration from both Pudumaipittan and Jayakanthan, but without displaying the same breadth of vision and limiting themselves to close examination of village life and the working class.

What has marked the work of progressive writers has been a common concern to make literature a tool to awaken and reunite the working classes. Basically they are propagandists and, in one sense, this trend has dominated most modern Tamil literature.

The earlier progressives were motivated by what they saw as the threat to Indian culture from English education and growing urbanization. Vedanayagam Pillai, a former district judge and a Christian whose first novel *Prathapa Mudaliyan* was published in 1879, declared that his work emphasized devotion to God and the obligatory social responsibilities. His contemporary Rajam Iyer felt compelled to write by the need to preserve rural traditions and the path to *Bhakti* (devotion), while Madhaviah, who also shared the anxiety about the survival of traditional culture, was urged to write by the status of

women, ignorant and uninformed (it was the period of child-marriage and child widows), and the threat urbanization posed to the individual.

In the same vein, the succeeding generation of writers used literature as a tool for social purposes. Two good examples are Va Ra's *Sundari* and Bharati's unfinished novel *Chandrikaiyin Karai.* Both deal with the problems of widows, their position in society and their re-marriage. In 1920 Gandhi entered the arena of national politics and his philosophy began to assert its influence on many writers. In 1926 Panayappa Chettiyar first wrote about the need for national independence and in 1930 K.S. Venkataramani wrote his novel *Desabhakthan Kandan* which propagated Gandhian ideals regarding rural development and the place of the village in the life of the country.

During the 1930s commercial magazines began to appear, the most popular being *Ananda Vikatan.* It owed its success mainly to Kalki, a prolific writer and the author of *Thyaga Bhumi,* a novel which became an instant success due to its nationalistic message. Kalki's impact on his readers was such that more magazines began to appear thus creating a vast market for popular writing. Since the 1970s these magazines have proliferated and today they have a strong hold on the cultural life of Tamil Nadu.

The Pudumaipittan "lineage" can be traced among a certain number of writers whose works constitute a very significant contribution to the language. In a sense, Sundara Ramaswamy's *J.J. Sila Kurippukal* and *Puliya Marathin Kadhai,* and G. Nagarajan's *Nalai Matrumoru Nale,* and a number of his short stories, represent the realization of Pudumaipittan's objective of placing literature in the context of the harsh reality of life. These two writers have in common their lucidity, their incisive points of view, sincerity with regard to their experience and a balance between social purpose and the needs of art.

From the time of Pudumaipittan onwards, Tamil literature has drawn inspiration from a handful of writers, almost all of whom are the product of Indian culture and Indian ways of thought. Among the most important of these are Ka Na Subramaniyam and C.S. Chellappa. These two writers were the ones who sustained modern creative and critical prose and poetry in the most adverse conditions during the period 1945 to 1965, both, with equal fervour, leading the movement towards literary criticism and the new poetry through the medium of various small-circulation magazines.

Ka Na Subramaniyam's *Poithevu* (1943), one of the most important novels in the Tamil language, draws upon the Tamil psyche with its innate preoccupation with the God/man relationship and the philosophical quest. His short stories are uneven in quality, yet one or two of them, like *Azhagi,* are very important. Chellappa's *Vadivasal* and *Jeevanamsam* also find their source in the traditional world.

Mowni, whose writings were first published in *Manikkodi,* must be considered a major figure in Tamil literature. Mowni's world is the world of the introvert. He brought forth in his stories an intensity of feeling which is unmatched in Tamil. He was able to create this intensity—mostly centering on the themes of man/woman relationships and death—thanks to a powerful yet deceptively simple prose style.

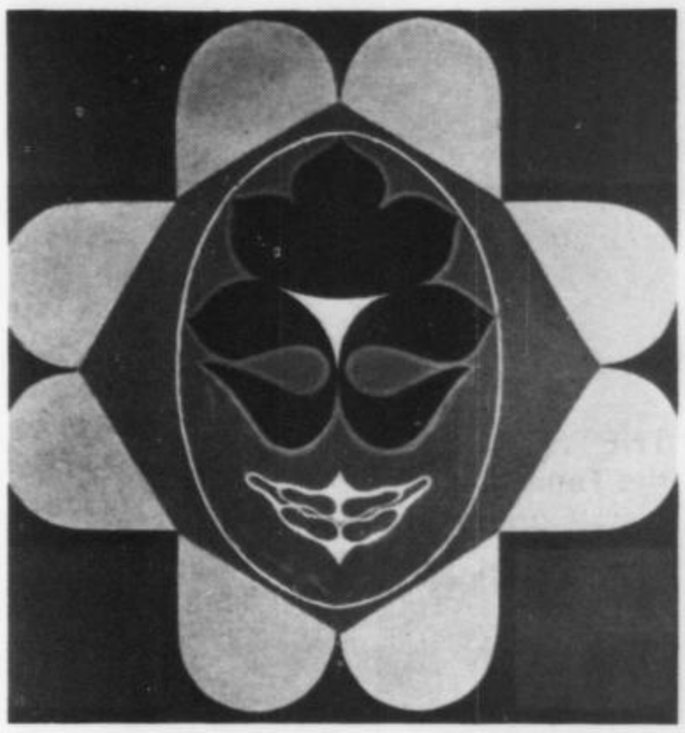
One of the most popular yet accomplished writers in the literary sense is T. Janakiraman. He is a strange combination of traditional influences and a capacity to give a dream-like quality to the life he depicted. Like many of his predecessors he was fascinated by the man/woman relationship, but his depiction of it was a clever balance between the popular writer's over-simplification of its intricacies and the complexity of Mowni. Born in a Tanjore village, his descriptions of the enchanting aspects of rural Tanjore, with its agricultural setting, temple culture and music, enhanced the appeal of his writing.

It was in his short stories, however, that he achieved his greatest literary success, and in this tradition a group of modern creative writers has emerged. Significant among them are Asokamithran, Vannanilavan, Vannadasan, Sa Kandasamy and Rajanarayanan. These authors are situated somewhere between Pudumaipittan and the leftist writers. With their under-stated style Asokamithran and Kandaswamy evoke the charm and elusiveness of the day-to-day life of the middle-class. They never over-react, they operate within narrow stylistic ranges, but their sensibilities are a sincere reflection of their experience.

Vannadasan and Vannanilavan have much in common. Both are post-1970 writers, they come from similar backgrounds and they are very sensitive to the physical and emotional life around them. To both, the simple joys and deprivations of ordinary people are important, though Vannadasan tends to romanticize them. He is a little dreamy-eyed in his portrayal of the eternal abiding goodness and charm of simple folk. Vannanilavan has a slightly larger canvas and is concerned with the psychological implications of situations—of human relationships, of economic situations and those arising from a sense of awe at the world.

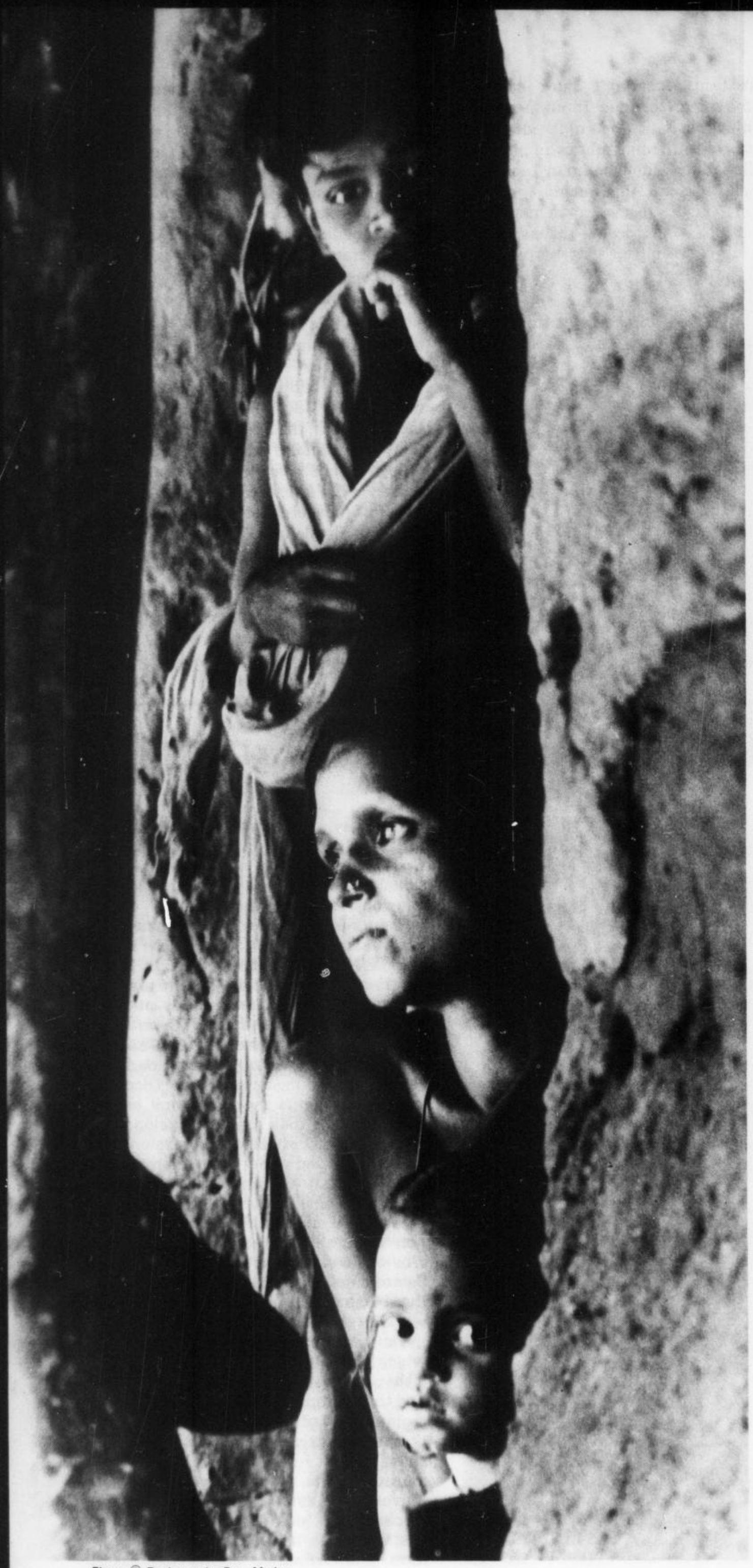
■ **S. Ramakrishnan**

CONTEMPORARY TAMIL PAINTING



Photos © V. Jayaraman, Madras

In both style and content contemporary artists of Tamil Nadu draw inspiration from many sources ranging from traditional sculptures with their mythological allusions to folk themes and developments in 20th-century European art. *Brahmasutra* (1978), above, by K. V. Haridasan, who has taken *Yantras,* linear diagrams used in ancient Tantric texts as a support for meditation, out of their mystical context and used them as a basis for abstract designs. In *Toilette,* below, K. Srinivasulu has combined folk motifs with a cubistic approach. Discussing the challenge modern Tamil artists have faced as they seek to develop their own individual styles of expression, the Tamil artist and critic V. Jayaraman has written: "... it was and still is today difficult for Tamil Nadu artists to give expression to an identity in line with their rich cultural heritage which is tightly woven around metaphysical values. Painters were particularly at a loss since there was no real prototype of traditional work for them to follow. Sculptures were the only forms of plastic expression to which they could refer since so little ancient painting had survived. They were to find the nucleus of their inspiration in the architecture of temples, in the romanticism that exists within a sculpture in spite of its rigorous classical measurements, in the rhythm of *rasa* [flavour] and *bhava* [mood], and in the fascinating contradiction between abstract ideas being expressed through form and figurative forms expressed through abstract designs—a rich fountainhead of 'Surrealism' as opposed to the self-induced hallucinations of the accepted Surrealists."



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Tamil women at the crossroads

by C. S. Lakshmi

IN the Tamil epics women are depicted as formidable personalities with superior moral power, capable of such extraordinary feats as burning down an entire city to avenge the death of a husband. This image persisted until the dawn of the twentieth century, by which time Tamil women were becoming aware that it contrasted starkly with the realities of their inferior status and were athirst for knowledge and formal education. A number of distinguished men supported the cause of women's education, but controversy arose about the kind of education that should be provided and about the medium of instruction. Since women were considered as "do-gooders" it was widely felt that education should prepare them for service in such careers as teaching and, later, medicine.

C. S. LAKSHMI *is a specialist in women's studies who is currently working on an illustrated social history of women in Tamil Nadu in the twentieth century.*

While the early women teachers who taught girls in their homes in the second half of the nineteenth century had mostly been Christians, in the early twentieth century it was Hindu widows who met the need for a body of committed teachers. Hindu widows were not allowed to remarry and there were large numbers of them because of the prevailing system of child marriage. (Little girls aged two or three often found themselves widows, condemned to a life of drudgery. Brahmin widows were also tonsured when they came of age, and thus became physical outcasts as well.)

The fate of many of these widows began to change through the pioneering work of a courageous young woman named Subbalakshmi, fondly known as Sister Subbalakshmi, who grew up among widows and was for many years haunted by a childhood memory of attending a wedding where she had seen a three-year-old girl being teased because she was a widow. Sister Subbalakshmi was herself widowed at the age of eleven and was only able to pursue her studies because she was encouraged to do so by her liberal-minded father. She trained to be a teacher and then opened a home for widows and began to train them as teachers too.

Women's education gave rise to many jokes about women who neglected their homes while their husbands struggled with the children, and about women who could not cook without referring to a book of recipes. New fashions in clothes were also made fun of in cartoons and jokes which expressed the anxieties and fears of a generation of people confronted by a changing world.

It was but a short step from education for "service" to activities in favour of reform. In the early twentieth century two Englishwomen, Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins, were active in the social and political life of southern India. In 1917 Annie Besant founded the Women's Indian Association, and the All India Women's Conference was inaugurated by Margaret Cousins in 1926. These movements fought for such major reforms as the raising of the age of consent for marriage, the franchise, and the abolition of the Devadasi system. [The Devadasi belonged to a caste of women dedicated to the service of the patron gods of the great temples]. Many upper-class Indian women were inspired to call for social reform by the two Englishwomen, who were demanding that the Vedic past should be revived.

Women also began to be increasingly active in writing and the other arts. Not only did members of the Devadasi community, who were traditionally artists, appear on stage and screen; women such as Kalanidhi, Rukmini Devi and D.K. Pattammal, who belonged to communities which traditionally did not practise the performing arts, now became prominent in dance and music. With the launching of *Jegan Mohini,* edited by Vai. Mu. Kodainayaki Ammal, and *Chinthamani,* edited by Sister Balammal, women's magazines run by women came into vogue and began to stimulate debate and discussions on women's issues.

As the nation-wide agitation for independence gathered momentum, women were inspired by Gandhi to enter the political arena. They picketed shops selling imported cloth, spoke on party platforms, travelled to spread Gandhi's ideas, wrote articles on the need for a new role for women, and became active in literacy programmes. ▶

Dressed in her finest clothes and garlanded with flowers, this Tamil girl is the focus of attention as she undergoes the ceremony of *satanku* to mark her arrival at the age of puberty. A relative places a red mark, known as a *pottu,* on her forehead both as a blessing and to ward off the evil eye.

Photo © Marie-Louise Reiniche, Paris

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Sister Subbalakshmi, one of the pioneers of education for Tamil women and leader of the struggle to rescue widows from their miserable status as work drudges and social outcasts.

TAMIL WOMEN AT THE CROSSROADS

▶ In 1947 the Women's Welfare Department was started and set itself "the difficult and comprehensive task of assisting women in rediscovering themselves". Since the 1950s the world of Tamil women seems to have expanded to encompass fields from which they were previously excluded. The working woman has become a familiar figure in the towns and cities. Women's associations have proliferated. The literacy rate among Tamil women is comparatively high.

In spite of these changes, however, the roles formerly performed by women have neither disappeared nor been transformed. Although it may be camouflaged in various ways, the traditional image of the chaste woman and the devoted mother is still reflected in modern Tamil literature, in the media, and in customs. Most female characters in stories have an overt and a hidden face. The overt face is seemingly "modern", but at some point in the story the character proves that modernity has not destroyed her hidden, more beautiful, traditional face. Gruesome punishments are often meted out to those who stray from this cast-iron mould: fire and water are considered purifying elements and have often been used as devices for the physical destruction of an "impure" character. When physical destruction is eschewed, social degradation, ostracism and neglect provide alternatives which in some cases may seem less merciful.

The media image of women, shaped by commercialization, is very close to that found in literature. In the media the traditional and modern images are often termed "good" and "bad", and more often than not the "good" prevails over the "bad". Commercial values have also affected family relationships, including the institution of marriage, with women being considered as saleable or non-saleable commodities. The dowry has assumed oppressive importance; instead of being liberated, the woman who works in an office has been transformed into a dowry-earning individual.

The gulf between the urban and rural woman has widened. In the early part of the century the rural woman was considered a romantic figure, morally courageous and physically beautiful. She sang soft lullabies and traditional love-songs in her unsophisticated rustic voice. Much has happened to change this idyllic image, and it is today realized that the rural woman belongs to an anonymous, faceless mass enmeshed in the reality of the struggle for a better existence.

For the Tamil woman today there are many grounds for apprehension but there are also grounds for hope. She stands at a cross-roads, and the very fact that she is aware of this is one hopeful sign. There are others. Most of the women's magazines that project the image of the homely woman will sometimes devote space to discussion of a law affecting women, women's psychological problems, or the way in which women's lives have been ruined by distorted values. Although coverage of such topics may be surrounded by masses of recipes and articles on embroidery and dressmaking, it nevertheless makes a dent, albeit a small one, in a structure built on hearth and home. From time to time a woman with a questioning mind is also portrayed in the media, but even though such portrayals are diluted because of commercial considerations they have still not been accepted without comment.

The earlier phases of "rediscovery" were directed into mother and child care projects. They were geared to traditional needs and were an extension of earlier charitable activities. Today organizations such as the Women's Democratic Front and the *Penn Urimai Iyakkam* (Women's Rights Movement) are bent on transforming the image of women and working towards more meaningful forms of "rediscovery". Most women, however, are still looking at the sky but have not yet decided to fly. Their wings are not clipped, and the time is not far off when they will use them.

■ **C.S. Lakshmi**

Three great scientists

Sir Chandrasekara Venkata Raman (1888-1970) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1930 for his work on the diffusion of light and for the discovery of what is known as the Raman effect. Raman discovered that when a beam of light passes through a liquid or a gas it is scattered and the frequency of some of the scattered light is changed. This change in frequency provides a way to study the structure of the scattering molecules, and the Raman effect has had wide applications in studying the constitution and properties of various substances—solids, liquids and gases. Born in Trichinopoly, he founded the *Indian Journal of Physics* and the Indian Academy of Sciences.

Srinivasa Ramanujan (1881-1920) was one of the greatest mathematicians of modern times. He was born into a South Indian Brahmin family at Erode, and at the age of 15 his genius was aroused when he verified the results of the 6,000 theorems collected in G.S. Carr's *Synopsis of Elementary Results in Pure and Applied Mathematics* and then developed his own theorems and ideas. In 1911 he published his first paper in the *Journal of the Indian Mathematical Society* and in 1914 travelled to England to work with the British mathematician G.H. Hardy at Trinity College, Cambridge. Ramanujan's knowledge of mathematics was extraordinary. His work has been applied to the investigation of the temperature of furnaces and his theories are being studied to explore their potentiality for understanding and regulating atomic furnaces.

Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar (born 1910), the astrophysicist, is the second Tamil to win a Nobel Prize. The nephew of Sir C.V. Raman, he was awarded the 1983 Nobel Prize for Physics for his *Theoretical studies of the physical processes of importance to the structure and evolution of stars*. He developed the accepted theory of the development of "white dwarfs"—small white stars of highly compacted, extremely dense matter.

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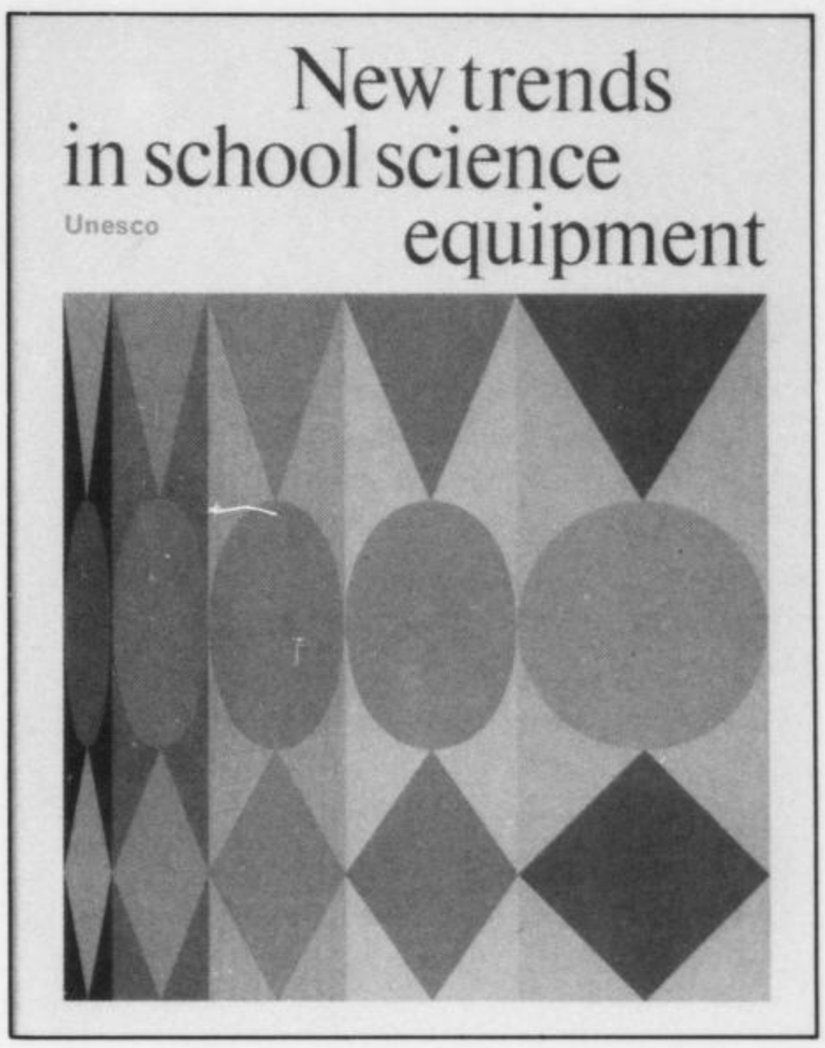

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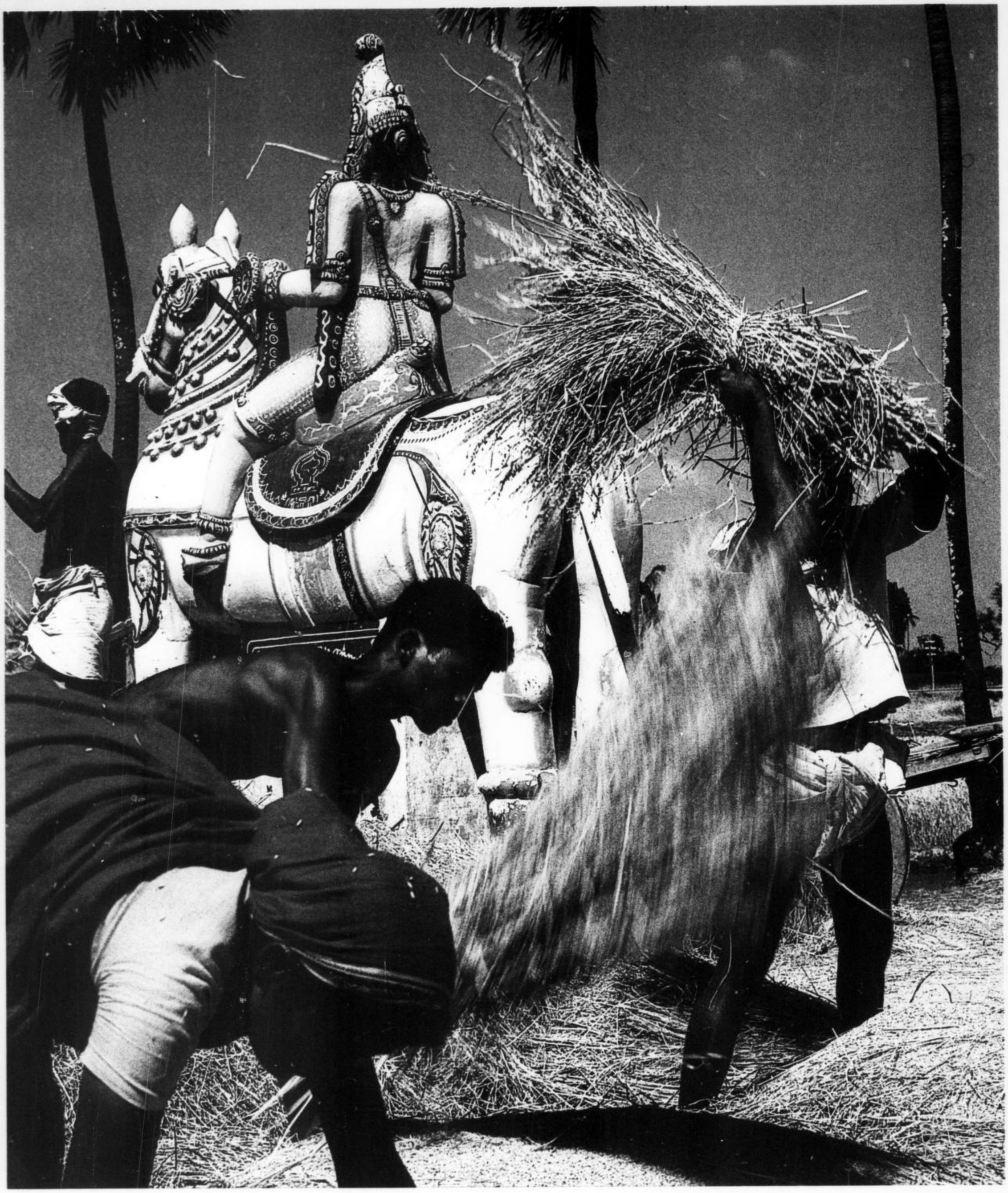

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A striking feature of rural life in the State of Tamil Nadu and other parts of southern India is the presence in almost every settlement of shrines and colourfully painted statues honouring folk heroes and protective deities. Above, the mounted effigy of a folk deity dominates a group of villagers threshing rice.